The Gawain Country

With bonus chapters

by Ralph Elliott

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Essays on the Topography of Middle
English Alliterative Poetry

For
Alan Garner
and
Colin Garner of The Edge

CONTENTS

One of the joys of reading Middle English literature with undergraduates is to introduce them to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This poem possesses, like other works of art which have withstood the passage of time, the capacity to modify the reader's sensibility, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, with every fresh encounter. It poses many questions, not solely of interpretation--is it allegory? is it comedy? was it intended for dramatic recitation? and so on--but of an historical, even biographical kind: who was the poet? Did he write the three other poems preserved in the same unique manuscript? Did he come from the region of England where the dialect was spoken in which the poem is written? Is there a connection between the fortunes of Richard II and the Cheshire men of his household and the poem and its unknown maker? Did the poet know the places he mentions and the landscapes he so vividly describes? Was his audience likely to know them, and for what kind of audience was he writing a poem combining courtly sophistication with what Chaucer's Parson calls gesting "rum, ram, ruf, by lettre"?

One day I was trying to convey to a group of students at the University College of North Staffordshire (now the University of Keele) my notion of an answer to one such question, a very minor one, no doubt, but puzzling all the same: just what sort of place did the poet have in mind when he described the Green Chapel? A cave he calls it, and a crevice, with three holes, and with a roof, all hollow inside, yet apparently also a *lawe* and a *berze*. It did not make much sense, yet the amount of circumstantial detail suggested a more closely envisaged place than the hazy traditional Chapel Perilous of courtly romance. I tried to draw a hollow barrow with three holes, for this is what all the editors seemed to believe the Green Chapel to be. It would not work: the picture looked like a cigar cracked across the middle and burnt at one end. My students were none the wiser, and I returned to the poem for more guidance. This was the beginning of my quest for the *Gawain* country.

On the assumption that the poet had some reason for localizing Sir Gawain's journey among real places I followed

his directions from North Wales across the Dee into Wirral. The nearest hilly countryside from there is the Pennine moorland where Cheshire meets Staffordshire and Derbyshire. Here I searched for barrows, caves, crevices which might correspond to the poet's peculiar chapel. Thus I found Ludchurch, whose very name was suggestive, in the heartland of a medieval abbey whose history began on the Welsh side of the river Dee.

The results of these early researches prompted the following short article, published on 21 May 1958 in *The Times* under the title "Sir Gawain in Staffordshire. A Detective Essay in Literary Geography".[1]

"One day in May, 1135, some white monks from Combermere Abbey founded a new Cistercian monastery near a ford of the Dee at Poulton a few miles upstream from Chester. In itself this was no very epoch-making event, but evidence is accumulating to strengthen the view that in due course the founding of Poulton Abbey led to the writing of the greatest medieval English poem outside the work of Chaucer: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The poet has left us no clue to his identity or habitat except the sensuous vividness of his landscape painting, which suggests both a remarkable eye for detail and a close familiarity with the scenes depicted, and at one place in the poem, while Sir Gawain searches for the Green Chapel, we are actually given a piece of genuine itinerary. Sir Gawain is journeying through North Wales, leaving Anglesey on his left hand, and then crosses the Dee by some ford into the "wilderness of Wirral".

The remaining action of the poem takes place in or near the castle of Bertilak de Hautdesert (who later turns out to be the Green Knight) and, although no more place-names are mentioned, the poet was obviously at home in the wild, hilly countryside he describes. The nearest scenery fitting these descriptions within the area covered by the poet's dialect is the Staffordshire Peak country, and here is our first important link with Poulton, for as the Welsh proved unruly neighbours, the whole abbey, while retaining its Cheshire possessions, was transplanted, in May 1214, to a wild corner of North Staffordshire moorland, by the river Churnet near Leek, to become the abbey of St Mary and St Benedict of Dieulacres.

The organizer of this move was Ranulph, Earl of Chester, whose father according to tradition had died near

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the same spot, at his favourite hunting lodge of Swythamley, which formed part of the new abbey's endowment. Here the monks established one of their granges, half farm, half miniature monastery, cultivating forest and marsh until the grange became the "Parke-laund" of the sixteenth century, and it is still a private seat.

There was never a castle at Swythamley such as Sir Gawain so opportunely discovered, but not only is Gawain's approach to the castle very like the journey from the present Abbey farm (with its few pathetic remains of the monastic buildings) to Swythamley Park, but there is also a distinct likeness between the terrain at Swythamley with its central eminence, once called Knights's Low, and the situation of the poetic castle, enthroned *on a lawe*. That such a castle never actually existed need not surprise us, for the several up-to-date features so expertly enumerated by the poet were only just beginning to make their separate appearance in English domestic and ecclesiastical architecture. It was a brilliant vision superimposed upon a genuine English hill.

It is here that Sir Gawain relaxes and is subjected to the temptation of his alluring hostess while her husband is away hunting, for three successive days, deer, boar, and fox. Here again the terrain is at times so vividly described that identification becomes possible, particularly on the second day, that of the boar hunt.

Starting from Swythamley, within echoing distance of the Roaches (the poet's *rocheres*), the hunters crossed the latter then headed northwards past Flash (the poet's *flosche*) towards the steep banks and narrow valleys of the Wildboarclough country beyond the river Dane. Many of the features the poet mentions in unusual topographical words still bear the same or closely similar names to-day.

Sir Gawain was able to relax at Bertilak's castle because upon arrival he had been assured that the Green Chapel which he sought was "not two miles hence." Again the poet was speaking from personal knowledge, and it is almost uncanny to read his description and the directions given to Gawain by his guide and then to walk the two miles that separate Swythamley Park from what is surely one of the most fantastic natural chapels in existence. From the top of a "high hill" Gawain's guide points to a steep valley:-

Ride down this path along that rocky bank
Till you reach the bottom of this forbidding valley,
Then look up a little among the trees on your left hand,
And there, along the valley, you will see the Green
    Chapel.

It is in the Sophistic theories of post-classical rhet-
oric that medieval *descriptio loci* had its origins. Decorat-
ive description, known as *ekphrasis*, whether of a landscape
or a person, a banquet or a tempest, became one of the
staples of post-classical writers. Priscian's version of
Hermogenes's *Progymnasmata* expands the latter's "ecphrases
of places" into "a seashore, a meadow, mountains, cities",
prognostic of many a later *descriptio loci*. Sidonius
Apollinaris, writing in one of his letters, speaks of
"banks rough with rocks or rivers frozen slippery, hills
rugged to climb or valleys scoured by the frequency of
landslides", a description in which realistic observation
mingles imperceptibly with a literary topos. Seven cen-
turies later Geoffrey of Vinsauf was to laud Sidonius as a
model of descriptive writing worthy of imitation. Geoffrey's
popularity as late as the fourteenth century is attested by
Chaucer's familiar apostrophe of him in *The Nun's Priest's
Tale*. The broad channels from the New Sophistic to the
English fourteenth-century poets are well known and have
been studiously charted.

But it was not all slavish mimesis, and Charles Sears
Baldwin was right when he wrote in *Medieval Rhetoric and
Poetic* that "at the end of the middle age, the Renaissance
already tinging his thought, Chaucer passes through a whole
course of Latin conventions, adapting critically as he goes,
and ranges beyond".[1]

Chaucer was not alone in this in the later fourteenth
century. Whoever wrote *Pearl* showed similar aptitude in
adapting the precepts of the rhetoricians to the particular
design of his poem. As I believe this poet to be the same
who wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Patience*, and

This chapter incorporates material previously published in
Les Langues Modernes 45, March-April 1951, *The Melbourne
Critical Review* 4, 1961, and *English Studies* 48, 1967, which
is here reproduced by kind permission of the Editors.
1. Charles Sears Baldwin, *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic*
(repr. Gloucester, Mass., 1959) p. 261.

Cleanness, I call him by preference the *Gawain*-poet and
consider the four poems to represent one coherent *oeuvre*.
Among the rhetorical precepts here relevant is appropri-
ateness of a description to the narrative: the poet should
be guided, in the words of Alberic of Monte Cassino "along
the highway of aptness". The passage should be functional,
its purpose should be some link with the mood or moral of
the story. At the same time it was recognized as a
legitimate form of stylistic amplification:

> Descriptio verbis,
> Ut dilatet opus,

Geoffrey of Vinsauf had written, following in the footsteps
of Matthew of Vendôme who had also stressed the need for
phrasing to be appropriate to theme.

The *Gawain*-poet showed himself more adept at fitting
description to episode and mood than most of his alliter-
ative fellow poets. In some cases among the latter the
modern reader's sensibility is offended either by incongru-
ities or by the sheer irrelevance of some of the descriptive
passages. In medieval terms, the poets simply followed the
letter of precept or example in mechanical fashion without
heeding the spirit. Book VII of *The Destruction of Troy*, for
example, opens with a few conventional lines of a spring
aubade which may serve as a fanfare to the arrival of Paris
with three thousand knights but hardly create a particularly
apt setting for the tramp of six thousand feet:

> In the moneth of May, when medoes bene grene,
> And all florisshet with floures the fildes aboute;
> Burions of bowes brethit full swete,
> Florisshet full faire; frutes were kuyt;
> Greuys were grene, & the ground hilde ...
>   (2734-38)

This is the mechanical rehearsing of largely irrelevant
stock material. As for incongruity, there is a good instance
in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. The king prepares to
fight the giant of St. Michael's Mount, whose depredations
have been sufficiently rehearsed to whet the audience's
appetite for a thoroughly good fight. Arthur's arming,
described at some length, heightens the tension. He sets
off, all ready, with his "brade schelde, and his brande
aschez", and one expects him to plunge forthwith like
Sidonius Apollinaris into a wilderness of rocks and cliffs,
bare, desolate, forbidding, to meet his man--or rather his
giant. Instead, the poet makes us skip across as pretty a

daisy-meadow as ever graced a medieval vision of Dan Cupid, complete with catalogue of falcons and pheasants and thrushes, and "of the nyghtgale notez the noisez was swette" (929). The incongruity is so deflating that it is with difficulty one recovers to welcome "the colde wynde" which eventually does blow across the scene when Arthur at length reaches "the cragge wyth cloughes full hye".

Where genuine imaginative involvement is lacking, a description is often a mere catalogue of ingredients, whether of a person's features or accomplishments, as in the *descriptio feminae* of Blanche in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*, or of scenic details in the case of a *descriptio loci*, as in the passage cited above or, at greater length, in Chaucer's *The Parlement of Foules* where trees, flowers, birds, animals are listed in the manner of one compiling a catalogue rather than observing natural phenomena. The saving grace in Chaucer's lists of trees (176-82) and of birds (330-64) lies both in their vivid, incisive epithets and, as J. A. W. Bennett pointed out, in the theme, vital to the poem, of the plenitude of nature which they illustrate and amplify. Where such saving grace is lacking, enumerative catalogues become merely tedious interpolations into narratives they do little or nothing to further.

The alliterative poets suffered the additional temptation, when endeavouring to amplify, of taking a prosodic pace forward without taking the meaning along with it by employing the easy tag or formula, the half-hearted alliterating synonym or stereotyped phrase, of which J.P. Oakden half a century ago provided such revealing lists in his pioneering *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English*.[2] Considering the wealth and variety of the topographical vocabulary available to these poets, the dullness of the diction is often astonishing. There were, for example, as will be seen in a later chapter, many distinctive words for "hill" or "mountain", yet the poet of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, in the episode between Arthur and the giant already mentioned, overworks the word *cragge* with its useful range of connotations by using it almost every time he has occasion to refer to St. Michael's Mount. The result is lack of variety of diction, particularly important in an episodic narrative poem, and the dilution of a valuable word. For *cragge* has distinctly "Gothick" overtones in other alliterative poems which are lost when it becomes, as in *Morte Arthure*, simply an overworked synonym for monte or *clyffe* or *hylle*.

2. J. P. Oakden, *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English. A Survey of the Traditions* (Manchester, 1935) pp. 263 ff.

The most successful descriptive passages are those which manage to steer a middle course between the Scylla of repeating the same word too frequently, like the word *castell* in the last hundred lines of Book XI of *The Destruction of Troy*, and the Charybdis of ringing incessant changes by culling near-synonyms from every source the language had to offer.

The chief danger of the former was that stereotyping of descriptive passages which tended to turn every scene either into sweet daisy-meadows or into vague "holtes and hethes"; and of the latter a general debasing of the descriptive, especially the topographical, vocabulary into mere counters devoid of those specific nuances of meaning which alone could give to any landscape its particular and memorable individuality.

Functional integration of a *descriptio loci* means allowing the scene where an episode takes place to elucidate or enhance the action or the mood of the character engaged in it. As Derek Pearsall pointed out some years ago: "The poet does not describe the winter in the mountains because he is fond of wild romantic scenery and wants us to share his pleasure in it, but because the narrative demands at this point an illustration of the discomforts of Gawain's 'anious uyage'. The description is functional in the strict rhetorical sense."[3] It is of course by no means improbable that medieval poets did respond, like others before or since, to a landscape, as pleasant or forbidding, and that their descriptions helped to evoke similar responses in their readers or listeners. In the case of the *Gawain*-poet, as with Chaucer, the rhetorical apparatus of Matthew of Vendôme, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, and others, was not a strait jacket but became a tool handled with innovative sensibility.

The point may be illustrated from *Pearl*, a poem which shares with other dream visions the twofold setting of the "real" world where the poet falls asleep and of the dream world where the vision takes place. Both are distinguished in this poem by sensitive handling of mood and language. The "real" setting is an arbour which owes something to the park-and-garden convention exemplified at its most typical by the *Roman de la Rose*, but there are important differences: the accumulation of detail which is the stuff of conventional *descriptio* is here brief and selective; also, it is August, "in a hy3 seysoun", and not May; and there is no water, and there are no singing birds. So much

3. Derek A. Pearsall, "Rhetorical 'Descriptio' in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'," *Modern Language Review* 50 (1955) 132.

for Matthew of Vendôme's

> Flos sapit, herba viret, parit arbor, fructus abundat,
> Garrit avis, rivus murmurat, aura tepet.

Moreover, as Elizabeth Petroff has noted in a recent essay, "the differences in vegetation are subtle but important. One expects flowering plants adorning a paradisiacal place, and spices are part of such a tradition, for few plants were grown in the Middle Ages solely for their beauty. But all the plants here are useful, and all suggest mortality".[4] The medieval reader familiar with actual gardens and nurtured on literary landscape conventions could not have helped noticing the poet's deliberate departures from traditions, at the same time being made aware of their symbolic import. Such a reader would have responded, no less than the modern reader does, to the mood of heaviness, of spiritual deprivation, of grief, which the opening scene of *Pearl* conveys. The technique is the same as in Sir Gawain's "anious uyage" as he traverses the forlorn wintry countryside where wretched birds on bare twigs were piteously piping for pain of the cold. To argue, as C. A. Luttrell does, that "the effect of melancholy is anything but spoilt by a contrast between an unhappy person's condition and the blissfulness of nature"[5] is not only to ignore this particular poet's method in all his poems, but to ignore the weight of evidence in English poetry from Grendel's mere to "Wessex Heights".

Moreover, the contrast in *Pearl* between loss and finding, between initial doubt and eventual consolation, is sustained by the contrasting landscapes of the subdued opening setting and the vivid, colourful opulence of the dream vision. Both are thus seen to be functional in the strict rhetorical sense, reflecting the changing mood of the central *persona* and underlining his spiritual pilgrimage from acquaintance with death to certainty of eternal life.

The second landscape of *Pearl* is rich in mystical colour and resplendent in the variety and richness of its adornment. The music of birdsong and of water is restored and a feast of language leads us into an exciting world of colour, sound, and "sensations sweet", as if we had suddenly

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4. Elizabeth Petroff, "Landscape in *Pearl*: The Transformation of Nature," *The Chaucer Review* 16 (1981) 184.
5. C. A. Luttrell, "*Pearl*: Symbolism in a Garden Setting", *Neophilologus* 49 (1965); reprinted in Robert J. Blanch, ed., *Sir Gawain and Pearl. Critical Essays* (Bloomington and London, 1966) p. 73.

stepped out of the menacing foreground of Fra Angelico's "Betrayal" into the world of promise painted beyond. The poet's diction is varied enough to mirror the richness of the scene, but not so much as to confuse or tire: the waters, for example, are *rauares, founce, pole, strem, floty vales, meres, broke*— but the simple *water* predominates, symbolizing the waters of baptism and of paradise which are important themes in the subsequent argument. Moreover, the description is not static; as the dreamer moves steadily forward the view alters and each stanza carries us further towards the "crystal clyffe" where the maiden is waiting. This movement inside a changing landscape is comparable to the changing scenes of the hunts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Another alliterative poem that opens like *Pearl* in a minor key is *Winner and Waster*. Here a conventional Maymorning landscape is disturbed by streams so rough and violent and by birds "dadillyng" so jarringly that the poet does not fall asleep until nightfall. At first glance the "dyn of the depe watir" strikes one as an incongruous intrusion of "northern realism" into a traditional medieval *plesaunce*; at second glance, however, one realizes that this is the poet's way of linking setting and theme, for the tenor of the poem is disturbing: all is not well by any means in Edward's England.

The dream setting of *Winner and Waster* is also of particular interest. It opens with a phrase, familiar from other poems, as in *Pearl* 65, suggesting that the poet knew not where in the world he was; then the scene takes shape as specific features are singled out and a mental picture is created. The scene is "a grassy space between hills", "a natural stage", according to John Speirs,[6] which on closer scrutiny is most likely a grassy plain enclosed by an artificial "mound", a mile in circumference, in which two armies in full array face each other. What emerges from the poet's description is in fact a picture very close in several important details to a medieval circular theatre of the kind represented in the Macro MS of *The Castle of Perseverance*. This shows no mound, only a ditch, but Richard Southern has argued cogently that the earth excavated from the ditch was presumably banked all round to provide both elevated tiers for the spectators and vantage points for dramatic action intended to be played on a hill.[7] At least once (271), the

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6. John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry. The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London, 1957), p.274.
7. R. Southern, *Medieval Theatre in the Round* (London, 1957, 2nd ed. 1975). The plan is reproduced as frontispiece

poet of *Winner and Waster* refers to "on hylle". The *platea*
of the theatre is repeatedly called "þis grene" in the text
of the play, which recalls the "lande þat was ylike grene"
of the poem (48), and some of the other words used later in
the poem to describe this grassy plain also have their
echoes in *The Castle of Perseverance*. Of course the *lande* of
the dream vision is envisaged as large enough to accommodate
the two hosts, probably a good deal larger than the area of
most actual medieval round theatres which would rarely, if
ever, extend to a perimeter of a mile, no matter how "exten-
sive", as Hardin Craig claims, the *platea* may have been.[8]
But it is as well to remember that the medieval circular
theatre has a close relation in the lists used for medieval
tournaments. Judging by contemporary illuminations most
lists were rectangular, but Chaucer is not alone in descri-
bing (in *The Knight's Tale* 1881 ff.) circular lists which he
several times calls a "theatre" and which vividly recall the
dream setting of *Winner and Waster*:

> I trowe men wolde deme it necligence
> If I foryete to tellen the dispence
> Of Theseus, that gooth so bisily
> To maken up the lystes roially,
> That swich a noble theatre as it was,
> I dar wel seyen in this world ther nas.
> The circuit a myle was aboute,
> Walled of stoon, and dyched al withoute.
> Round was the shap, in manere of compas,
> Ful of degrees, the heighte of sixty pas,
> That whan a man was set on o degree,
> He letted nat his felawe for to see.

In size, shape, and the presence of an enclosing ditch and
wall (albeit of stone) this "theatre" is practically ident-
ical with what I assume to be the dream-setting of *Winner
and Waster*. For a *descriptio loci* to be "functional" one
could hardly ask for more.

At the same time one begins to suspect that the poets
of the second half of the fourteenth century were by no
means as disinclined to introduce into their *descriptiones
locorum* details actually observed in the real world as the
generation of critics brought up on Ernst Robert Curtius's
European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages has been led
to believe. Medieval writing is rich in naturalistic detail

in *The Macro Plays*, ed. M. Eccles (EETS 262, London, 1969).
8. Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle
Ages* (Oxford, 1955), p. 349.

of all kinds, and such detail frequently combines the
stylistic demands of amplification with an obvious delight
in its presentation. Realism may not have been an artistic
principle in the literature of the Middle Ages, but it
furnished countless ingredients for passages of description.
There are, as will be seen in subsequent chapters, quite a
few topographical terms which make their appearance in such
passages and which derive not from literary tropes and
rhetorical models but from toponymy. The alliterative poets
of the west-midland "revival" no doubt had their ears at-
tuned to the *artes poeticae* of the acknowledged masters, but
they also kept their eyes on the local landscape and the
places they knew at first hand from the Malvern Hills to the
Wirral and beyond.

THE LANGLAND COUNTRY.

In a poem as subject to diverging critical interpretations as is *Piers Plowman* it is perhaps as well to seek some common ground. For the reader of both the poem itself and its critics this may be a help, for *Piers Plowman* is as complex a poem as it is a rewarding one, complex in structure, in thought and intention, and in the movements and settings of its numerous episodes.

Much has been written in attempts to illuminate and interpret the spiritual pilgrimage or quest which most critics acknowledge as the central theme of *Piers Plowman*. The following examples, drawn from an embarrassing opulence of critical comment over the past twenty years and here arranged simply in chronological order, may serve as illustrations. E. Talbot Donaldson distinguishes between the concern of the *Visio* with salvation and of the *Vita* with perfection;[1] Elizabeth Suddaby takes the line:

"Lerne to loue," quod kynde, "and leef alle oþere,"
                                                    B xx 208[2]

to be the poet's "final statement" and the most "adequate summing up of the theme of the poem and the spirit in which it is written."[3] S. S. Hussey concludes that it is "the practice of the good life leading to salvation which I believe it was the Dreamer's (and so the poet's) chief concern

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1.   E. T. Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet* (New Haven, 1949) ch. vi.
2.   The texts of *Piers Plowman* here cited are: A-text, ed. G. Kane (London, 1960); B-text, ed. G. Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London, 1975); C-text, ed. D. Pearsall (London, 1978); unless otherwise stated.
3.   E. Suddaby, "The Poem *Piers Plowman*", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* liv (1955) 103.

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to find."[4]

Elizabeth Zeeman (Salter) writes:

The deepest theme of *Piers Plowman* might, then, be viewed as an exploration of the journey to God through Christ - the reaching of the "treasure of Truth" along the highroad of Love: a study of the way in which Christ, with his doctrine of love, enables the pilgrim to Truth and his goal, Truth, to become one.[5]

Morton W. Bloomfield sums up the thesis of his book, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-century Apocalypse*, in these words:

Briefly, the thesis of this book is that *Piers Plowman* is concerned with the subject of Christian perfection rather than with salvation. The former is the creation of the monastic tradition and is the older and more social Christian world view. This tradition was still alive in the fourteenth century and in England. It is oriented towards the Kingdom of God and eschatology. It finds its natural expression in the apocalyptic frame of mind and in corresponding literary forms. *Piers Plowman* can be best understood as an apocalypse that reflects this older Christian tradition.[6]

John Lawlor regards "the awakening to self-knowledge as the precondition of understanding the truths so long accepted" as constituting "the imaginative authority of Langland's work",[7] while Edward Vasta expresses a similar view succinctly in the words: "What never changes is the subject of the poem: growth in the spiritual life."[8]

Most of these views do not exclude or contradict each other; their divergence is rather a matter of varying emphasis than of irreconcilable differences in approach or interpreting what Langland said. And fundamental to every interpretation of *Piers Plowman* (the common ground, if we like)

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4.   S. S. Hussey, "Langland, Hilton, and the Three Lives", *Review of English Studies* vii (1956) 150.
5.   E. Zeeman, "*Piers Plowman* and the Pilgrimage to Truth", *Essays and Studies* xi (1958) 15-16.
6.   M. W. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1961) p. vii.
7.   J. Lawlor, *Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism* (London, 1962) p. 301.
8.   E. Vasta, *The Spiritual Basis of Piers Plowman* (The Hague, 1965) p. 27.

is an awareness that the poem describes a search, however circuitous, however inconclusive it may be, directed in the first instance to Truth's dwelling-place (B v 555) and in the last instance "to seken Piers þe Plowman" (B xx 382). The theme of the "search" or "quest", whether in spiritual terms or in terms of knight-errantry and romantic adventure, is a medieval commonplace. We owe to this theme the greatest achievements in medieval literature, like Dante's *Divina Commedia* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as well as the tedium of episodic narratives in which an idealized hero accomplishes whole series of unlikely feats of arms and *amour*. But the one thing that all of these have in common—including even the mystical writings making use of symbols of ladders or journeys or pilgrimages—is some endeavour to create what Charles Muscatine has called "the locus of the characters and actions and their spatial environments",[9] a setting, if we like, or what John Lawlor, speaking of *Piers Plowman*, aptly calls the "terrain" of the poem.[10]

How much these settings can differ, even among poems as closely associated in place and time as those of the fourteenth-century alliterative revival in the west midlands and north-west of England, can be seen by placing side by side *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Piers Plowman*. The former contains a number of remarkably particularized landscape descriptions in which the selection of unusual features and the use of rare topographical terms suggest an indebtedness to real English landscapes known to the poet and the audience alike; while in *Piers Plowman*, on the other hand, "often the background against which characters meet is quite unknown, and this gives an impression of vagueness and greyness to the poem",[11] hence the justice of Lawlor's "highly individual terrain".[12] It is the purpose of this chapter to examine the "terrain" of *Piers Plowman*—what for convenience I have called the "Langland Country",—in some detail in the hope that such a study may help in some way towards a fuller appreciation of Langland's poem and of his art.

The medieval dream poem, *Pearl*, for example, or Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, generally distinguishes between two settings, that of the actual world in which the dreamer falls asleep and that of the dream experience. In *Pearl* there is a marked difference between the subdued calm of the poet's confined "erber grene" and the brilliance and spaciousness of the dream world of "downeȝ" and "klyffeȝ" and "holtewodeȝ bryȝt". In the *Book of the Duchess* the poet uses his bedroom as a setting to link his waking experience with the start of his dream, but soon wanders forth "to the feld", "doun by a floury grene" into "the woode" where the Black Knight was sitting. Often the "real" setting is heavily indebted, as in *Winner and Waster* or *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, to what has become known as the "May-morning convention",—the painting of a convenient opening picture combining pretty landscape ingredients—a convention which owes something to medieval rhetorical precept, something to the model provided by the *Roman de la Rose*, and something to observation of nature. *Piers Plowman* opens in this manner in the A and B texts:

> Ac on a May morwenynge on Maluerne hilles
> Me bifel a ferly, of Fairye me þoȝte.
> I was wery forwandred and wente me to reste
> Vnder a brood bank by a bourne syde,
> And as I lay and lenede and loked on þe watres
> I slombred into a slepyng, it sweyed so murye.
> B Prol. 5-10

In C it is also "May mornyng on Maluerne hulles", but the bank by the stream with its sweetly rippling water becomes simply a "launde", probably just some grassy plot. The "real" setting among the Malvern hills is not elaborated further, although the vision that follows may well have owed some topographical details to a scene which Langland knew,[13] and it provided the poet with a striking image:

> Thow myȝtest bettre meete myst on Maluerne hilles
> Than gete a mom of hire mouþ til moneie be shewed.
> B Prol. 215-216

We are told, in B vii 147-148, that the Dreamer awakes, after the episode of the Pardon,

> Metelees and moneilees on Maluerne hulles.
> Musynge on þis metels [a myle] wey ich yede,

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9. C. Muscatine, "Locus of Action in Medieval Narrative", *Romance Philology* xvii (1963) 120.

10. Lawlor, p. 9 The same word is used by E. Salter and D. Pearsall in their edition of *Piers Plowman* (London, 1967) p. 36.

11. R. Woolf, "Some Non-Medieval Qualities of *Piers Plowman*," *Essays in Criticism* xii (1962) 117.

12. Lawlor, p. 9.

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13. See A. H. Bright, *New Light on Piers Plowman* (London 1928).

but the "wey" is left unspecified, a vague "roaming about"

> Al a somer seson for to seke dowel.
> B viii 2

Apart from the Malvern hills, only London provides Langland with another "real" setting, in the opening lines of C v, and again the poet makes no effort to elaborate. Clearly, what interested him in his own actual environment was not its physical but its social and spiritual landscapes, and it is these which he imaginatively transformed into the visionary terrain of *Piers Plowman*. It is not that Langland was any less aware of actual places than of people and of spiritual matters, but his awareness was not expressed in geographical or topographical terms so much as in imaginative ones. Westminster is a place where worshippers of Meed live (B iii 12), a place of law and the abuse of law (C x 237, B xx 285ff); Winchester fair offers scope for dishonest trading (B v 205); Dunmow, for all its gastronomical overtones, has primarily a matrimonial relevance (B ix 173); Abingdon was of interest because of its abbot, apparently a man sufficiently "redoubtable" for the allusion to be watered down in the C-text to the innocuous "Engelonde";[14] the mention of Pamplona (B xvii 256), an allusion to the Hospital of St Mary Rounceval at Charing Cross, linked here with Rome, shows Langland's bitter reaction to the dispensation of fraudulent foreign pardons from the hospital.[15] And similarly with the whole atlas of places whose names figure in *Piers Plowman*, from Babylon and Bethlehem to Bruges and Buckinghamshire.

The "Langland country" is a constantly, often rapidly changing terrain, and it both reflects and contributes to the at times direct, often tantalizingly circuitous argument of the poem. Setting follows setting, each supplanting the next "according to a very loose and vague imaginative logic in the *Visio*, and no logic at all in the *Vita*".[16] From the field full of folk we travel to the king's court; the pilgrims to St Truth "blustreden forþ as beestes ouer [baches] and hilles" (B v 514), blindly, helter-skelter; the poet wanders onwards

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14. See B x 331, C v 176; and the articles by N. Coghill in *Medium Aevum* iv (1935) 83-89 and by G. D. G. Hall in *Medium Aevum* xxviii (1959) 91-95.
15. See M. W. Bloomfield in *Philological Quarterly* xxxv (1956) 60 ff.
16. Vasta, p. 26.

> [by a wode, walkyng myn one].
> B viii 63

Sometimes (as in the line just quoted) we are in the real world; sometimes we traverse a dream landscape which has topographical features that can be visualized, however indistinctly; and at other times again such topographical features become the vehicle of allegory as in Piers's description of the way to Truth

> "by a brook, beþ-buxom-of-speche,
> [Forto] ye fynden a ford, youre-fadres-honoureþ,"

and so on past "a croft" and "a bergh" to "a court", all named in similar manner (B v 566 ff.), "baffling" enough for W. P. Ker to have complained that "nothing is made of the brook or the croft by way of scenery; the pictorial words add nothing to the moral meaning".[17] Ker's complaint is understandable, but he was wrong in his conclusion. The topographical words do create a sense of terrain, an awareness of obstacles, of roads forking, of movement, indeed of possible if not actual progress. The symbol of the "high road" is a persistent one in *Piers Plowman* and it is supported by occasional references to topographical features, however unconnected these may be into any properly composed landscape. To us, no longer reared on *The Pilgrim's Progress*, such directions as Piers's or Study's (B x 162 ff.) or Scripture's (A xii 51 ff.) may seem heavy-handed, oppressively artificial, but they are as much part of Langland's imaginative topography as the field full of folk or the vision from the "mountaigne þat myddelerþe hiȝte" (B xi 324) or the place of the jousting at Jerusalem in B xviii. What Langland's "pictorial words " as well as his shifting settings and devious journeyings add to the moral meaning of *Piers Plowman* is suggested by Muscatine:

> His use of place and location—along with the other traits I have mentioned—suggests that for him, despite his doctrinal orthodoxy, the structure of the moral world— to which most of his predecessors could give coherent spatial expression—had become a thing newly problematic.[18]

The high road to Truth, to salvation, to perfection, to

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17. W. P. Ker, *English Literature Medieval* (London 1912, repr. 1945) p. 145.
18. Muscatine, p. 122.

social reform was not, for Langland, as it turned out, the seemingly simple route mapped out by Piers. To this fact the poem bears witness, and it does so not least by the "serpent-like movement" which John Burrow has shown to be "essential to the progress of Langland's poem".[19] Langland, as the critics have reminded us, is "learning", "growing", "exploring", "awakening" as he moves across the terrain of his experience and the topographical words are used not to provide landscapes as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* but landmarks. No matter how we regard the latter poem, whether as a serious investigation into the ethics of Christian chivalry or, as I prefer to do, as a festive entertainment, comic in the fullest sense of that word, we may agree that the icy north-western landscapes of Arthurian "faerie" as much as the lawlessness of fourteenth-century Cheshire are part of the challenge and the testing of Sir Gawain. In *Piers Plowman* there is no such attempt to integrate land-scapes into the texture of the poem, but there is the endeavour to let the Dreamer's journeying and the terrain which he traverses express some of the questioning, the confusion, the bewilderment, as well as the growing under-standing of his quest.

The keyword in all this is *movement*, for even the longer passages of debate and dissertation are not free from the undercurrent of restlessness which every now and then erupts into an orgy of motion. Langland's Dreamer is a wanderer:[20] from the opening lines of the poem to the final resumption of the pilgrimage in its last few lines there is movement, sometimes leisurely, sometimes, as John F. Adams has said, the "poetic effect is one of immediacy and urgency: time *is* running out".[21] At some points of the journey there is a deep sense of frustration:

> "This is a long lesson", quod I "and litel am I þe
>   wiser;
> Where dowel is or dobet derkliche ye shewen."
> B x 377-378

at others a sense of renewing hope:

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19. J. Burrow, "The Action of Langland's Second Vision", *Essays in Criticism* xv (1965) 267-268.
20. Cp. J. Martin, "Wil as Fool and Wanderer in *Piers Plowman*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* iii (1962) 535-548, especially 543 ff., and Woolf, p. 118.
21. J. F. Adams, "*Piers Plowman* and the Three Ages of Man", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* lxi (1962) 39.

"Sire Dowel dwelleþ," quod Wit, "noʒt a day hennes."
B ix.1

But through it all the Dreamer is carried forward, eager to persevere though often "wery [for]walked" (B xiii 204), meeting on his journey that numerous and varied company of figures—Thought and Clergy and Anima and Conscience and the rest—who people "the weye" of the Langland country. Much of the movement is steady, however uncertain the direction, but at times Langland accelerates his tempo, as in the Samaritan episode in B xvii 50 ff. where the verbs of motion gather into a veritable *presto*: "ac he fleiʒ aside", "Hope cam hippynge after," and thus on to:

> "For I may noʒt lette," quod þat Leode and lyard he
>   bistrideþ
> And raped hym to [ryde þe riʒte wey to Ierusalem].
> Feiþ folwede after faste and fondede to mete hym,
> And *Spes* spakliche hym spedde, spede if he myʒte,
> To ouertaken hym and talke to hym er þei to towne coome.
> And whan I seiʒ þis I soiourned noʒt but shoop me to
>   renne
> And suwed þat Samaritan þat was so ful of pite. . .'
> B xvii 81-87

All the major characters in *Piers Plowman*, as Elizabeth Zeeman has reminded us, are involved in "the activity of travel, whether material or spiritual":[22] in B iv 24 ff. Conscience "[caireþ] forþ faste"[23] with Reason and others following; the friars of B viii 8 ff:

> be men of þis moolde þat moost wide walken,
> And knowen contrees and courtes and many kynnes places,
> Boþe princes paleises and pouere mennes cotes,
> And dowel and do yuele, wher þei dwelle boþe.
> B viii 14-17

Ymagynatyf, in B xi 439, "shoop hym for to walken"; Con-science and Patience "passed, pilgrymes as it were" (B xiii 215),

> And as þe[i] wente by þe weye—of dowel þei carped—
> B xiii 220

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22. Zeeman, p. 8.
23. Langland repeats *faste* five times in less than twenty lines, but this is greatly modified in the C-text.

a touch of medieval verisimilitude, to be sure, for it was then possible to discourse *en route*, as the Canterbury Pilgrims also did, before the internal combustion engine and the jet engine made such civilized activity impossible. At B xviii 112 ff. Mercy and Truth, and later Righteousness and Peace, come, respectively "walkynge", "so[fte]ly walkynge", "rennynge", and "pleyinge". Langland knew how to use verbs; as Rosemary Woolf has astutely observed:

> Whilst the dominant tone of the *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain* is set by their recurrent adjectives, that of *Piers Plowman* is set by the verbs, which constantly suggest abrupt and vigorous action--action such as leaping, jumping or rushing.[24]

While this is less applicable to the Dreamer himself than to those whom he meets "in the weye", for the verbs used to describe his journeying are mostly *gon, walke, wenden*, and *rome*, it is true that all the verbs of motion in *Piers Plowman* contribute something towards the feeling of persistent exploration which the poem is undoubtedly intended to convey.

That we are by no means always sure whither the exploration is directed or whither it is leading may also have been part of what Langland intended; it is certainly one of the principal impressions the poem makes on the reader. Such vagueness is in part the vagueness of dreams, and one wonders how far Langland was deliberately reaching beyond the familiar use of dream allegory into some kind of dream psychology. "He does not exploit its [the dream's] decorative possibilities"[25] because, unlike the poets of *Pearl* or *Winner and Waster*, he is not interested in the embellishment which rich description or colourful pageantry provide in these poems. But, unlike these poets also, he is able to convey aspects of dream experience which are much more akin to Freud than to Macrobius. Perhaps Fr. Dunning dismisses too readily the brief discourse on dreams in A viii 131 ff. as "of no particular significance or interest",[26] for Langland's comments, however unoriginal, are at least pertinent to his search for certitude:

Manye tyme þis metelis han mad me to stodie,

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24. Woolf, p. 117.

25. J. A. Burrow, "The Audience of *Piers Plowman*", *Anglia* lxxv (1957) 383.

26. T. P. Dunning, *Piers Plowman: An Interpretation of the A-text* (Dublin, 1937) p. 153.

And for peris loue þe plougman wel pensif in herte,
For þat I saiȝ slepyng ȝif it so be miȝte.

A viii 131-133

It is one of those moments in the poem of "tantalizing awareness--of having been several times on the brink of knowing" which John Lawlor characterizes as "very faithful to dream-experience recaptured in the first moments of waking".[27] But equally true of *Piers Plowman* is Langland's refusal to "strictly observe a line of demarcation between sleeping and waking",[28] hence the peculiar character of the Langland country, the wide sweeps across whole continents of spiritual experience as well as the sudden intimacy of two figures earnestly discoursing along a fourteenth-century English highway. To the world of dream experience belong also those shifts in time, ("Al a somer seson", B viii 2; "þre daies we yeden", B viii 117; "many yer after", B xiii 3; etc.) which make the chronology of *Piers Plowman* as hard to establish as its topography.[29] In the dream world of *Piers Plowman* anything becomes possible, "for the fertile imagination of the allegorist works much after the manner of dreams"--so that (to vary Stanley J. Kahrl's argument somewhat) events, scenes, figures "follow one another more by free association than by organic unity".[30] The method served Langland well, for it allowed him to be both vague and specific, to combine the abstract with the concrete, to counterpoise the actual and the spiritual. Those who take the poet to task for an ill-structured poem[31] overlook the poignant reflection which *Piers Plowman* provides of a perplexed soul seeking certitude. Those who censure the shifting time of the poem ignore the co-existence in any man's life of years and seconds. Those who

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27. Lawlor, p. 113.

28. Martin, p. 541.

29. R. W. Frank argues for unity of place and time for the *Visio*, but this cannot be extended to the *Vita*. See his "The Pardon Scene in *Piers Plowman*", *Speculum* xxvi (1951) 324.

30. S. J. Kahrl, "Allegory in Practice: A Study of Narrative Styles in Medieval Exempla", *Modern Philology* lxiii (1965) 107.

31. Thus J. J. Jusserand in *Piers Plowman. A Contribution to the History of English Mysticism*, tr. M.E.R. (repr. New York, 1965) p. 155: "There is therefore nothing prepared, artistically arranged, or skilfully contrived, in his poem. The deliberate hand of the man of the craft is nowhere to be seen. He obtains artistic effects, but without seeking for them; he never selects or co-ordinates."

feel lost in the uncertain terrain of the Langland country
must remember that poet and Dreamer were at home as much in
the Malvern country and Cornhill as "on a mountaigne þat
myddelerþe hiȝte" and "in Peres berne þe plouhman".

If the argument of Langland's poem is often riddling,
his diction is remarkable for its simplicity, remarkable not
solely because he is often probing profound spiritual prob-
lems, but also because the alliterative tradition throve on
ornamentation. That this is true of his topographical vo-
cabularly we shall see in a moment; that it is true of his
diction in general has frequently been commented upon[32]
but is worth re-stating in this context. No doubt Burrow is
right in suggesting that Langland was writing for an audi-
ence which included many people not familiar with the rich
vocabularly of other alliterative poets,[33] and we may assume
that it was also an audience of to no small extent unlet-
tered, "lewed" people, whose familiarity with techniques and
diction of contemporary sermons would have provided some
equipment towards an understanding of Langland's thought.[34]
It is Langland's great merit to endow abstractions with
flesh and blood, as in his justly celebrated portrayal of
the deadly sins in B v, and to dramatize ideas, as in the
building of Unity and the assault of the forces of Anti-
christ in B xix and xx. His use of simple figures of speech,
as R. E. Kaske has shown, is just one device "of stating
ideas that are in some way difficult to express, in terms
that will make them at once intellectually understandable
and poetically stimulating".[35] His use of colloquial lan-
guage, even slang, is another: "doted daffe" (B i 140; cp. B
xi 427, 434); "blynd bosard" (B x 272); "lewed Iuttes" (B x
467); and so forth. But above all else it is Langland's
command of what Lawlor has called "a kind of natural
rhetoric"[36] that enables him to express vigorously and
often memorably what many a lesser poet has sorely travailed
to express:

Thus þei dryuele at hir deys þe deitee to knowe,

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32. Recently, for example, by S. S. Hussey, "Langland's
Reading of Alliterative Poetry", *Modern Language Review* lx
(1965) 164.

33. Burrow," Audience", 377 ff.

34. Cp. A. C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry*
(London, 1964) ch. iv.

35. R. E. Kaske, "The Use of Simple Figures of Speech in
Piers Plowman B: A Study in the Figurative Expression of
Ideas and Opinions", *Studies in Philology* xlviii (1951) 599.

36. Lawlor, p. 208.

And gnawen god [in] þe gorge whanne hir guttes fullen.
B x 57-58

That preyeres haen no power this pestilences to lette.
For god is deef nowadayes and deyneth vs nat to here.
C xi 60-61

He shal haue a penaunce in his paunche and puffe at ech
a worde.
B xiii 88

Langland's gift "to see the highest spiritual concep-
tions in terms of a rooted concreteness, a firm grasp of the
particular",[37] enables him also to describe the terrain of
his spiritual pilgrimage in words firmly rooted in English
topography. It is not a large vocabulary and many words
which add a distinctive colouring to poems like *Pearl, Sir
Gawain and the Green Knight, The Wars of Alexander*, or the
alliterative *Morte Arthure*, are conspicuously absent from
Piers Plowman. Characteristically, the largest group of top-
ographical words in *Piers Plowman* is that describing whole
realms and regions, words like *reame, rewme* or *contreie* or
londe. It is to such words that the poem owes something of
its macrocosmic quality, that sense of expansiveness which
embraces kingdoms and continents, and which is reminiscent
of the cosmic imagery of *Antony and Cleopatra*: "*Piers
Plowman* is planned, as the opening lines tell us, on a
cosmic scale: its dream province spans Earth, Heaven and
Hell".[38] The words in this group are mostly common words:
*contray, coste, erde, erthe, folde, grounde, kyth, londe,
marche, molde, reame, shire*. Their use varies, as in other
alliterative poems, from the specific to the often meaning-
less tag, and in some other poems, too, notably *The Wars of
Alexander*, their frequent employment creates a similar
spaciousness of terrain as in *Piers Plowman*. Many of these
words, admittedly, are but the staple of alliterative
formulae,[39] and Langland's use of them is often mechanical:

The mooste meschief *on Molde* is mountynge [vp] faste.
B Prol. 67

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37. D. Traversi, "Langland's *Piers Plowman*", in *The Age of
Chaucer*, ed. B. Ford (London, 1954) p. 143.

38. E. Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (Oxford,
1962) p. 7.

39. Cp. J. P. Oakden, *Alliterative Poetry in Middle Eng-
lish. A Survey of the Traditions*, pp. 389-391.

Riden and rappen doun *in Reaumes aboute*.
> B i 95

or in this line from Skeat's A-text, with its instructive variants in other manuscripts and in the other versions:

Was neuer gome *vppon grounde* seththen god made heuene,
> A xi 170

where Kane's A-text has 'vpon þis ground' (173), as also in Skeat B x 224, while another manuscript (Kane's M) substitutes *moolde* for *grounde*. Not that it makes much difference, although the use of the demonstrative pronoun always modifies a mere formula towards more specific meaning:

For [ye] be men *of þis moolde* þat moost wide walken.
> B viii 14

The mooste partie of þis peple þat passeþ *on þis erþe*.
> B i 7

The word *londe* is frequently associated with "lord" or "lordship" in *Piers Plowman*, an alliterative convenience which Langland is happy to make use of:

Til þow be a lord and haue lond	B xi 23
In lond and in lordshipe	B xiv 263
The lordshipe of londes.	B xv 555

That many of these words are semantically dispensable in their contexts is shown by the gain in the reviser's

Out of þe west, as it were, a wenche, as me thouhte
> C xx 117

as against the earlier "out of þe west coste" (B xviii 113).

A few less common words should perhaps be added to this group: *greot* in the sense of "the earth, ground" is not common in the alliterative poems, nor for that matter outside them,[40] and in *Piers Plowman* it occurs but twice in the C-text (xiii 22, 175); *sokene* "a district, soke" occurs only once (as "Rutland soke" in A ii 75 (Kane), and B ii 111, and as "Banbury soke" in the corresponding C ii 111); I have not found it elsewhere in the alliterative poems, although it occurs in place-names, mainly in the south mid-

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40. MED s.v. *grēt* (3), 2.

lands and in southern England.[41] The word *waste* "wasteland" occurs once only in B Prol. 163 in the formulaic "boþe in wareyne and in waast", and is not common in other alliterative poems. The *Gawain*-poet uses it forcefully to describe the region of the Green Chapel:

þer wonez a wyȝe in þat waste, þe worst vpon erþe.[42]

On the other hand, the related *wildernesse* occurs more often and provides Langland with a word that conveys vigorously something of the perils of spiritual journeying:[43]

For wente neuere wye in þis world þoruȝ þat wildernesse
That he ne was robbed or rifled, rood he þere or yede.
> B xvii 101-102

Langland uses *wildernesse* technically, as the *Gawain*-poet does in his reference to Wirral, of a tract of country where forest jurisdiction did not apply, so that outlaws and robbers were freely lurking "in þe wode and vnder bank" waiting for victims. Such a *wildernesse* is therefore not incompatible with the familiar spring landscape of medieval *descriptio loci*:

I wente forth wyde-whare, walkynge myn one,
By a wilde wildernesse and by a wode-syde.
Blisse of þe briddes abyde me made,
And vnder lynde vpon a launde lened y a stounde
To lythen here layes and here louely notes.
Murthe of here mouthes made me ther to slepe.
> C x 61-66

Words denoting fields and moorland, forests and woodland, add further dimensions to the broad terrain of the Langland country, although they are more sparingly used than words like *londe* or *molde*, and in the main more specifically, as in B xi 351-354:

Ac yet me merueilled moore how many oþere briddes
Hidden and hileden hir egges ful derne ...
In Mareys and moores,

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41. See A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements* (English Place-Name Society vol. XXV and XXVI, Cambridge, 1956 repr. 1970) Part II pp. 133 f., s.v. *sōcn*.
42. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2098.
43. This is quite lost in the much tamer C-version.

the last line of which the C version (xiii 166) reinforces into a double formula without losing the contextual aptness:

In mareys and in mores, in myres and in watres.

The temptation to be sometimes merely formulaic, apparent in this example, is as irresistible with words of this group as of the first; so we find "in frithes and forestes" (C ix 224); "þe floures in þe Fryth" (B xii 221); "on laundes" (B xv 298, 304); "wilde wormes in wodes" (B xi 329, xiv 113); and others. Yet Langland was not devoid of sensibility in the use of some of these topographical words. Perhaps he owed the word *croft*, in the sense of a small, usually enclosed, piece of agricultural land, to his own roots in the countryside of the west midlands, for while the word is common in field names it is rare in fourteenth-century poetry. Piers uses it in his allegorical directions in B v 572 and in the appropriately rustic register of:

I hope to haue heruest in my crofte.
B vi 290

Uncommon also and equally well chosen is *wareine* "warren", first recorded in *Piers Plowman* (B Prol. 163) according to the *New English Dictionary*, though increasingly common in later field names. Other words in this group beside those mentioned are *felde, hethe, leye*, and perhaps we should include *gardyn* and *herber*. That Langland altogether eschews the phrase *on bent*, so common in the alliterative poems, and more often than not a mere tag, should perhaps be accounted to his credit. That he did not know it is unthinkable, especially if, as is likely, he knew *Winner and Waster* where the word *bent* occurs four times. Even the *Gawain*-poet, whose topographical vocabulary is particularly interesting and who uses *bent* discerningly a number of times, is not above making a tag of it.

A third group of topographical words adds its share to the theme of the wayfaring and wandering of Langland's Dreamer, although only two of them, *gate* and *wey*, are used extensively. The other three words, *lane, path*, and *strete*, are as exceptional in *Piers Plowman* as elsewhere in fourteenth-century poetry. *Lane*, for example, I have found only in *The Pistill of Susan* and once in Chaucer (*Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* 658) in a line strongly reminiscent of alliterative verse in general and *Piers Plowman* in particular:

Lurkynge in hernes and in lanes blynde,

which recalls Langland's "lurkynge þoruȝ lanes" (B ii 219) as well as his "hidden hem in hernes" (B xviii 404). For the constant reference to the Dreamer's (and the poet's own) road Langland prefers *gate* and *wey*, often the "heiȝe gate" (as in B iv 42) or the "heigh wey" (as in B xii 37). The theme of people going " forþ in hire wey" (B Prol. 48) is a persistent one in *Piers Plowman*, and the poet's virtual restriction to the two most familiar words (which, incidentally, are the only two the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* uses) may be a deliberate emphasizing that the Dreamer's spiritual pilgrimage is indeed a quest common to all men along the familiar "heiȝe wey to heueneward" (B xiv 212).

If the "road" words denote movement and progress, however circuitous, the small group of "cave" words and the larger group of words denoting hills and valleys add little variety to the landscapes of *Piers Plowman*. The three words denoting caves are negligible to the meaning of the poem, although *spekes* appears to be unique to *Piers Plowman* in the phrase "in spekes and in spelonkes" (B xv 275). The latter word occurs also in *The Wars of Alexander* and in *Mandeville's Travels* and is twice used of the coffin in *St Erkenwald*. *Herne* derives from Old English *hyrne* "corner" and effectively conveys the sense of a hiding place in the phrase quoted above and in the forceful movement of the line

Alle fledden for fere and flowen into hernes.
B ii 236

Compared with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as well as with other alliterative poems, *Piers Plowman* is not rich in "hill" words,--*berghe, bonk, doune, hulle, mount, mountaigne, toft*,--and of these only the last is of lexical interest. It derives from Old Norse *topt* and appears in late Old English as *toft* with the meaning "homestead, site of a house" or "a place where a messuage has stood", which is the meaning Dr Johnson, for example, records. In dialect, however, it developed the meaning of "a hillock in flat country", which the *New English Dictionary* first records in *Piers Plowman* where the word occurs in B Prol. 14:

I seiȝ a tour on a toft trieliche ymaked,

and in B i 12:

"The tour on þe toft," quod she, " truþe is þerInne."

Some of the A-text scribes, according to Kane's variants, appear to have been sufficiently unfamiliar with *toft* to have substituted other words. The C-text retains the second occurrence of *toft*, but for B Prol. 14 is has the rather feebler:

> And say a tour—as y trowed, Treuthe was there—ynne.
>
> C Prol. 15

It would be foolish to claim that the handful of "hill" words in *Piers Plowman* achieves anything like the superb scenic effects which the *Gawain*-poet manages to create with vigorous words like *clyffe, cragge, felle, knarre, knot, scowte*. For such effects a much more consistent depicting of landscape is required as well as the pictorial and auditory qualities of the words themselves. Langland is content with a bare mention or two of "Maluerne hilles", with the "Bergh, bere—no—fals—witnesse" as a piece of moral topography, with the "mountaigne þat myddelerþe hiȝte", and a few other protuberances in his spiritual landscape. Perhaps the gentle slopes of the Malvern hills were inadequate to produce in Langland the sense of scenic grandeur evinced by the "*Gawain* country"; perhaps, and rather more probably, Langland saw the world, whether as the field full of folk or from the mountain of Earth or in the final passus of the poem, as "the plain of earth, set between Heaven and Hell . . . seeing everything at a glance—a God's eye view",[44] in which a mountain is aptly called a *toft*—a hillock in flat country. Similarly, the wanderer's more earth-bound vision from the "heigh wey" is flat, broken by journeying figures rather than by natural features.

And if hills are few in *Piers Plowman*, valleys are even fewer. Again the interest of the words here is lexical rather than artistic. Apart from the reference to the "paas of Aultoun" in B xiv 304, Langland uses the common words *dale* and *vale*, as well as the rarer *valay* and *bache*. Both these appear to have troubled the copyists. Where A vi 2 (in Kane's edition) has "ouer [baches] and hilles", the variants record *valeis* (thus Skeat, and Knott and Fowler[45]), *dales* and *bankes*. The B-text in Skeat (v 521) has "ouer bankes and hilles", a safe formula for which the alliterative poems provide numerous parallels. Kane and Donaldson, and Pearsall's C-text (vii 159) revert to "ouer baches and

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44. Salter, p. 71.

45. *Piers Plowman. A Critical Edition of the A-Version*, ed. T. A. Knott and D. C. Fowler (Baltimore, 1952).

hilles",[46] which is probably what Langland wrote, for *bache* is a good west-midland word for a valley or stream and is found in place-names in Cheshire, Shropshire, and Herefordshire, the "real" Langland country, if we like.

There is no watery obstacle in *Piers Plowman* such as confronts the Dreamer in *Pearl*, and although the *bourne* at the opening of *Piers Plowman* "sweyed so murye", holding out promise of "plesaunces" to come, little topographical use is made of water in the poem. It plays a part in the spiritual landscape, to be sure, but it is a minor rôle, and the words Langland uses are all plain ones: *borne, broke, dich, flode, ryuer, see, welle*, and the word *water* itself. Langland's wanderer is no seafarer: the only large river he knows well, as befits one living "yn London and opelond bothe" (C v 44), is the Thames, and the only expanse of water with which he is at all familiar is Noah's Flood.

This brief survey of Langland's topographical vocabulary will have confirmed two important points made earlier in this chapter: the plainness of much of the poet's diction, and the essentially macrocosmic character of the terrain of *Piers Plowman*.

The simplicity of Langland's diction, as far as his topographical words are concerned, is not only that of the common words on which he mainly relies, but also, paradoxically, that of his uncommon words, for words like *bache* and *toft* and *wareine* are country words, some of them more particularly west-midland words. Despite his residence in London, Langland was a west-midland man, and to the evidence examined by M.L. Samuels to determine the linguistic provenance of the three texts of *Piers Plowman*,[47] may well be added such modest pointers as the reappearance of *baches* in the C-text, which Samuels concludes to have circulated in the poet's own native areas of the Malvern hills. But such words are few, and it is more sensible to argue that the whole of Langland's topographical vocabulary must take its place with the colloquialisms and the domestic imagery (as in B xvii 321 ff.), the numerous proverbs and much else besides as constituting the characteristic idiom of the poem, as well as contributing towards the poet's power of making the abstract palpable.[48] Piers's allegorical signposts to Truth

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46. Although some manuscripts read *balkes*, the word used in *Pearl* 62.

47. M. L. Samuels, "Some Applications of Middle English Dialectology", *English Studies* xliv (1963) 81-94, especially p. 94.

48. Although it must be remembered that the C revision often achieves the opposite effect. Cp. Donaldson, pp. 51 ff.

point along a spiritual highway, but the landmarks are firmly grounded in English topography: a brook, and a ford, and a croft, and a hill, leading to a stronghold such as must have been familiar to every medieval English wayfarer. Langland probably had no particular landscape in mind, it is too much a set piece for that, but he knew the English countryside and used its vocabulary to create the spiritual *reame* in which the quest for Truth was to take place. Anything less firmly rooted in the facts of topography might have smacked too much of "faerie" for so serious an enterprise. And, *mutatis mutandis*, these comments may be applied to other sections of the poem, both *Visio* and *Vita*, in which setting or terrain is at all elaborated.

The opening vision of the field full of folk immediately establishes the duality of the Langland country, its mingled, sometimes confused, spiritual and, in contemporary terms, realistic features. Within a few lines of his opening Langland can say, without incongruity:

> Some putten hem to plou3 . . .
> And somme putten hem to pride . . .
> B Prol. 20, 23

a juxtaposition as warranted in the context of this vision as is the sight of hermits going to "Walsyngham" (B Prol. 54) when we have only just been taken into "a wildernesse, wiste I neuere where" (B Prol. 12). No wonder that in a poem so eager to plunge *in medias res* the course should be a "riddling" one, that we should lose all count of time, and that we should find ourselves at one moment in an English tavern and at another on Calvary. Langland's topographical vocabulary is a small ingredient in all this, but it adds its share: positively, by establishing a spacious flatness across which Langland's "gates" and "ways" criss-cross like a modern road map of England; negatively, by not mapping movement too clearly, by not suggesting either progress or stagnation unequivocally. Comparison with other poems is instructive here. In *Pearl* the Dreamer's progress also takes place in no man's land:

> I ne wyste in þis worlde quere þat hit wace——[49]

but it is orderly progress, and the landscape, for all its symbolic opulence and mystical colouring, can be visualized step by step. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the hero leaves the world of Arthurian romance to cross into Wirral,

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49. *Pearl* 65.

a deliberate signpost, as I believe, to that other landscape in which "an old caue, Or a creuisse of an olde cragge" is the central feature. And when the *Gawain*-poet wishes to indicate a different type of movement, as in the confused entanglement of the fox hunt or the wide sweeps across country, around hills and along valleys, as in the boar hunt, he uses significant topographical words and appropriate verbs to create the desired effect.

Langland's mode, as we have seen, is different, "an alternate dawdling and darting movement"[50] against a changing background that allows "realistic" fourteenth-century scenes to melt into biblical landscapes and into a spiritual terrain where ideas become figures and words are made flesh. And it all ends where it began, among "folk" and the "brewere" and the "lewed vicory", a "lord" and a "kyng", a "mansed prest . . . of þe march of Ireland" and the friars. The Langland country is circular, like the world which it represents.

A study of the "terrain" of *Piers Plowman* and its vocabulary can thus in some way contribute to our understanding of Langland's design and appreciation of his art. Perhaps such a study does no more than confirm the perplexities of the Dreamer's search, but then these are a central fact in the poem. Perhaps it does no more than underline the poet's "natural rhetoric", but then this is the mainstay of his art. In the study of a great poem, such as *Piers Plowman* is, no detail is so unimportant as to warrant neglect. And not only the poem, but the poet himself,[51] may become a little more familiar. The words drawn from the west-midland countryside are few in *Piers Plowman*, but they are genuine; the knowledge of actual places which the poem evinces is meagre, but the intimate scenes of the poem are sharply and authoritatively drawn; the actual distances which William Langland travelled in his life were probably short ones, even by medieval standards, but in his spiritual wayfaring the poet of *Piers Plowman* traversed the *reames* of all human experience.[52]

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50. Woolf, p. 118.

51. Whose individuality at least and perhaps his identity also have been established beyond doubt by G. Kane's authoritative study, *Piers Plowman. The Evidence of Authorship* (London, 1965).

52. I wish to express my thanks to Miss Carolyn A. Angas for her assistance in the preparation of this chapter.

4. ROMANTIC QUEST IN THE WEST MIDLANDS:

STAFFORDSHIRE AND CHESHIRE LANDSCAPES

IN 'SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT'

I

Towards the end of 1389 John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, returned from Spain to England having successfully married two of his daughters into the royal houses of Castile and Portugal at the cost of a long-cherished ambition to ascend the throne of Castile himself. As he rode to attend a meeting of the Privy Council at Reading on 10 December, he was welcomed home by his nephew, King Richard II, kisses were exchanged, and *"en signe de bon amour d'entier cor entre eux"* the king took the collar from his uncle's neck and placed it round his own, and his retainers henceforth wore the same by his command.[1]

At about the same time an unknown poet, writing in traditional alliterative verse and in the dialect of the northwest midlands, where John of Gaunt had extensive possessions, composed *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. One of the glories of medieval English literature it tells of Sir Gawain's perilous adventure at a weird Green Chapel and of his return to the court of his uncle, King Arthur. Sir Gawain had successfully accomplished his mission, but not without some element of failure. As he arrives back at Arthur's court "þe kyng kyssez þe knyȝt"[2] and as a mark of respect to Sir Gawain it is agreed that the green belt which he has brought back from his adventure should henceforth be worn as a baldric by all the knights of the Round Table.

There are other parallels between John of Gaunt's activities and passages in the poem. Sir Gawain, on his way from the court to find the Green Chapel, passes through Cheshire, more specifically through "þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale" (701), part of a notoriously lawless corner of four-

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Reprinted by permission of the Editor from "Staffordshire and Cheshire Landscapes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *North Staffordshire Journal of Field Studies* 17 (1977) 20-49.
1.   S. Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt* (Westminster, 1904) pp. 341, 355.
2.   *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2492.

teenth-century England:

> wonde þer bot lyte
> þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied. (701-2)

John of Gaunt, in 1393, found himself riding through Cheshire, "the most disorderly county in England", as Armitage-Smith describes it,[3] to quell an insurrection. He succeeded, just as Sir Gawain succeeded in passing through unscathed despite encounters with "foes" and wild men and beasts.

On a more pacific level there are some notable similarities between the Christmas festivities described in the opening section of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the various celebrations held at the Duke of Lancaster's houses, including his castle of Tutbury in Staffordshire, complete with minstrelsy, New Year's gifts, performances of "enterludez" (472), and recitations of "grandes appertises d'armes" of which the Duke was fond.[4]

In view of such parallels it is not surprising that scholars have expended considerable ingenuity in attempts to link the composition of the poem with one or another of the known retainers of John of Gaunt, or with one of his castles, or somewhat more remotely with the house of Lancaster or its possessions. Marginal scribbles in the unique manuscript (British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x), anagrams, acrostics, numerology, have all been drawn upon to support one theory or another. The present chapter is rather less ambitious. What it attempts to do is to follow the poet's own geographical signposts into the heart of the northwest-midland countryside where its dialect places the poem and where the scribal characteristics of the manuscript place the only surviving text. In this locality some striking parallels present themselves between the poet's descriptions and actual features in the landscape. To explore these features and relate them to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the purpose of this chapter.

Such a study may help to enrich our understanding of an important aspect of this writer's technique; it may also, incidentally, bring us closer to the poet himself and to the environment in which he wrote, about which we know far too little. To put both his technique of landscape description and his geographical background into wider perspective calls for some preliminary observations.

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3.   Armitage-Smith, p. 351.
4.   See Elizabeth Salter "The alliterative revival, II," *Modern Philology* lxiv (1967) 234-5, and Armitage-Smith, p. 412.

The general character of the dialect of the four poems preserved in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript has long been recognized as broadly northwest midland, which includes south Lancashire, Cheshire, north Staffordshire, and Derbyshire.[5] More recently this has been narrowed considerably by a study of the graphemic forms of the manuscript, that is of the language as recorded by its scribe, which may or may not have been that of the poet also: "This text, as it stands in MS Cotton Nero A.x, can only *fit* with reasonable propriety in a very small area either in SE Cheshire or just over the border in NE Staffordshire".[6] The assumption underlying the present chapter, that the language of the poet is indigenous to the region described and is closely akin to that of the surviving text,[7] has not gone unchallenged. Thus Morton W. Bloomfield wrote in 1961: "In the minds of some investigators, the location of the dialect seems to be reliable evidence for locating the castle where the *Gawain*-poet wrote his poem or where Bercilak held court. This does not seem to me to be very soundly based. Why a poet should have to put the scene of his poem and be himself located in the area of the dialect he uses in writing is not at all evident. Yet we find this unsound and dubious assumption made in almost every case where these questions arise. The dialect of a poem certainly tells us something about the place of origin of the writer, if we can be sure that the scribe has not transformed it into his own dialect, but it is not necessarily that of the scene of the poem. A Scotsman could write about Yorkshire, a northern Lancashire man could write about southern Lancashire."[8]

Although Bloomfield's warning is justified against too hasty conjecture, the assumption is not as unsound as he asserts. Literary evidence is quite strongly in favour of associating a writer's dialect with the region with which he is most familiar and which he is most likely to write about.

5. See, for example, the comments in N. Davis's revision of the edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* pp. xxvi f., or the note on dialect in J. J. Anderson's edition of *Patience* pp. 22 f.
6. A. McIntosh, "A new approach to Middle English dialectology," *English Studies* xliv (1963) 5.
7. "There is no evidence to suggest that the dialect represented by the manuscript is not substantially that of the poet." J. C. McLaughlin, *A Graphemic-phonemic Study of a Middle English Manuscript* (The Hague, 1963) p. 14.
8. M. W. Bloomfield "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: an appraisal," *Publ. Mod. Lang. Assoc. of America* lxxvi (1961) 10.

Examples in English literature are many, from Chaucer on pilgrimage in Kent or Langland on the Malvern hills in the fourteenth century, to Thomas Hardy in his Wessex novels in the nineteenth or Alan Garner in east Cheshire in the twentieth. Transformations or, to use A. McIntosh's term, scribal "translations" do of course occur in the Middle Ages, as in Robert Thornton's Yorkshire veneer to a southwest Lincolnshire version of the alliterative poem *Morte Arthure*, which appears to have been originally composed in the north midlands.[9] This particular poet admittedly describes Arthur's adventures in distant places, but the landscapes and the terms used to describe them remain doggedly those of the poet's own native surroundings. Probability appears to favour the *Gawain*-poet's landscapes being similarly those of his own countryside, not only because of the weight of literary-historical evidence, but even more so because of the distinctive nature of some of the topographical features described. The most striking of these is the Green Chapel itself, the venue of Sir Gawain's second encounter with the Green Knight and the scene of the denouement of his adventure. D. S. Brewer comments thus: "Whatever it is, the poet is not making up something out of his head. There is just that mixture of vagueness and detailed description which is to be expected when a man describes something which he expects his audience easily to recognize . . . There are no hints of it elsewhere, apparently. And yet it is an integral part of the poem we know. If this is admitted, it seems a strong indication that the man who composed the poem was native to the ground he describes".[10]

The poet appears no less familiar with the itinerary followed by Sir Gawain once he has left behind the Arthurian court at Camelot. He mentions place-names, is aware of directions and geographical details, and uses, as Tolkien and Gordon noted, "the definite article as though the places were familiar to him".[11] Sir Gawain rides through north Wales, leaving "alle þe iles of Anglesay" (698) on his left, and at a place called "þe Holy Hede" (700) he crosses "ouer þe fordez by þe forlondez" (699) into "þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale" (701). Thereafter the ways and the countryside are "straunge" to the knight, but the road to the Green Chapel

9. Cp. A. McIntosh, "The textual transmission of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *English and Medieval Studies presented to J. R. R. Tolkien* (1962) pp. 231-40.
10. D. S. Brewer, "Gawayn and the Green Chapel," *Notes and Queries* cxciii (1948) 13.
11. In the first edition (Oxford, 1930) p. 93.

appears familiar enough to the poet who leads his hero to within two miles of it, to where a castle, on a hill, surrounded by "a park", is ready to welcome the weary traveller. And while Sir Gawain relaxes at the castle in the company of his seductive hostess, hunting parties traverse the surrounding countryside, some of which is described in unusual topographical terms. Finally, as New Year dawns, Sir Gawain departs to keep tryst with the Green Knight and his route to the Green Chapel is brought vividly before our eyes by means of circumstantial directives and singular natural features.

It is not surprising that the poet's descriptive passages, more particularly those describing natural scenery, have frequently been singled out for discussion and for praise. For praise, because of their superb visual qualities, their "sensuous vividness", in D. A. Pearsall's phrase,[12] and for discussion, because the *Gawain*-poet along with but a few of his contemporaries appears to have creatively re-fashioned the conventional *descriptio loci* which formed an integral part of a long-established medieval *ars poetica*.[13] It is important to consider this claim in some detail, for it supports the thesis that the landscapes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are not merely an original re-shaping of a familiar *topos*, but provide a link between the poem and the identifiable locale to which both poet and audience belonged.

Descriptio, one of the recognized modes of rhetorical amplification in the poetic art of the Middle Ages, is dealt with at varying length by the medieval writers on rhetoric. Matthew of Vendôme, for example, devotes much of his *Ars Versificatoria*, dated around 1170, to *descriptiones personarum* and also deals at some length with *descriptio loci*, the description of place. He gives brief specimen descriptions of the seasons and a more detailed one of a garden, listing in order flowers, trees, and birds, an order which is generally followed by medieval writers.[14] Thus Chaucer in the familiar opening of the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* speaks of "the flour . . . every holt and heeth . . . and smale foweles", which may serve as an epitome of such a description. To present such sequences an

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12. D. A. Pearsall, "Rhetorical 'descriptio' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*" *Mod. Lang. Review* 50 (1955) 130.

13. Cp., for example, the discussion in Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (London, 1973) pp. 147-52.

14. See E. Faral, *Les arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1924, repr. 1962) esp. pp. 82 ff.

enumerative technique is employed: catalogues of plants or animals, or of topographical features, are given; heedless of incongruities and clearly not concerned to establish verisimilitude. Theory became practice in such influential works as the *Roman de la Rose* whose poetic landscapes survive recognizably in Chaucer's springtime daisy meadows and many other works contemporary with Chaucer and the *Gawain*-poet. Indeed, they continue well into the fifteenth century when Sir Thomas Malory's knights in the *Morte Darthur* still rode more often than not, rather repetitively, "over holts and hills, through forests and woods, till they came into a fair meadow full of fair flowers and grass".

The spring landscape of medieval tradition is often, at least for the modern reader, singularly inappropriate to the context of battle and bloodshed, of grief or death, to which it provides setting and background in poems of adventure. It may of course be argued that this is purely a convention designed to evoke certain expectations in the contemporary audience, like a gong announcing dinner. The sound of the gong is quite irrelevant to the courses about to be served. This explanation may well account for the incongruities between the idyllic "pleasaunce" in poems like the alliterative *Morte Arthure* or *The Destruction of Troy* and subsequent encounters in which people fight to the death.[15] What distinguishes the *Gawain*-poet is his apparent awareness of such incongruities and his consequent attempts to match the natural setting more fittingly with the mood and circumstances of his hero's experience. This is true of *Pearl* in which a subdued Lammastide setting, without birdsong or murmuring streams, acts as a prelude to the ecstatic yet chastening dream experience that follows. The dream landscape is exuberant enough, but in the end the dreamer comes down to earth again, as it were, to find himself back in the serene seclusion of his garden nook heavy with the scent of flowers and herbs. Mood and setting are exquisitely matched.

The economy of pictorial detail which characterizes the opening and closing setting in *Pearl* and which contrasts strikingly with the accumulation of descriptive items in so many catalogues of natural features in other poems of the alliterative revival, or for that matter in Chaucer,[16] is employed to even greater effect in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. As a technique of description such economical selec-

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15. Cp. J. Finlayson, "Rhetorical 'descriptio' of place in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*", *Modern Philology* lxi (1963) 1-11.

16. As in the list of trees in *The Parlement of Foules* 176-82.

tion of detail is not confined to natural settings in this
poem; it characterizes the poet's treatment of dress and
armour, of meals and merry-making and hunting. There are oc-
casional passages of enumeration, when items are juxtaposed
to create an impression of richness or completeness. But
even here the poet is able to make subtle distinctions,
generally by syntactic means, as when Sir Gawain's point of
view is conveyed in the carefully arranged series of visual
impressions created by his first glimpse of Bertilak's
castle. The sentences are sufficiently varied to avoid the
monotony of a catalogue. On the other hand, when the poet
does compile a list, as in the description of Gryngolet, Sir
Gawain's horse (600-2), the items are enumerated with the
help of repeated definite articles, but the passage is kept
brief and is integrated into a wider context of more varied
syntactic patterns.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the *Gawain*-
poet's landscape descriptions, repeatedly noted by
critics,[17] is their presentation through the hero's eyes.
Such treatment verges on what we would now call psycho-
logical realism: the beholder cannot absorb a scene in its
totality; instead his eyes (and occasionally other senses as
well) pick out the more conspicuous features and these are
noted, sometimes at random, sometimes more methodically.
Chaucer does this in his description of the pilgrims in the
Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, dwelling briefly on such
immediate impressions as a brightly-coloured garment, or a
loud laugh, or spotty cheeks. But Chaucer the pilgrim who
noted these things was also Chaucer the poet who knew a
thing or two about the pilgrims not discernible by eye or
ear, like the debts owed by the Merchant, so that the
portraits become more complex. Nor are the models of the
rhetoricians entirely forgotten: the description of a pil-
grim may not be a methodical itemizing of appearance from
top to toe, yet such may be enshrined amid much other de-
tail, as in the brief but deliberate downward glance from
the Wife of Bath's broad hat to the "foot-mantel aboute hir
hipes large" and thence to the spurs on her feet. Rhetorical
descriptio personae is not so much ignored as brilliantly
modified. And this, *mutatis mutandis*, applies also to the
poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

By selecting the salient features of a scene, as they
would have presented themselves to a beholder on the spot,
the poet is able to call forth recognition on the part of

17. For example by Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1965)
pp. 167 ff.

his audience, for the features he selects are the ones most
likely to be as firmly imprinted on his listeners' memories
as upon his own. That Sir Gawain, for example, notices
strange craggy outcrops with gnarled stones,

ruʒe knokled knarrez with knorned stonez, (2166)

as he looks around for the Green Chapel, is an unexpected,
one might almost say gratuitous, piece of topographical
information, unless it serves to pinpoint an actual spot to
whose recognition it is relevant. Even if this were not so,
if the poet were merely adding such touches to create an
atmosphere of mystery and to emphasize the wild and inhospi-
table place to which Sir Gawain is drawn, he is noticeably
departing from a convention that tended to insert a set-
piece *descriptio loci* when the narrative required it. But
that "mixture of vagueness and detailed description" noted
earlier makes the former alternative the more probable, a
probability considerably enhanced by the mention of specific
places as the hero nears the countryside in which the Green
Chapel is such a striking feature. The "mixture" can be
further characterized as combining what would now be called
"romantic" and "realistic" elements. Briefly, one might say
that the poet, aware of the conventions of romance narra-
tive, included such expected ingredients as the hero's
"anious uyage" (535), the toilsome journey leading through
difficulties and hostile encounters to a *locus amoenus*, but
was also—for reasons which we can only guess at—anxious to
establish links with actual places. Hence the twofold
character of Bertilak's castle, for example, which func-
tions, in the narrative as the *locus amoenus* appearing like
an answer to Sir Gawain's prayer after the hazards and
deprivations of his journey; yet at the same time it is a
"modern" architectural vision, firmly planted upon a solid
English *lawe*, "hill", in a park, enclosed and measured,
within two miles of a Chapel Perilous that turns out to be
an unusual natural feature, half cave and half crevice. This
dual mode of description reflects the poet's concern to
depict in his poem a hero whose virtues and reputation place
him into the imaginative world of Arthurian romance, but
whose failure to pass all the tests imposed upon him in this
story places him no less firmly into the real world of
fallible human beings. Or, to put it differently, the Sir
Gawain of this poem may be the most renowned and virtuous of
all the knights of the legendary Round Table, endowed with

alle prys and prowes and pured þewes, (912)

with all excellence, prowess, and knightly accomplishments, yet his Achilles heel is revealed almost as soon as he sets foot in north Staffordshire.

That the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was an innovator is beyond doubt: his descriptions of scenery as much as his attitude to his hero are proof of his ability to express a personal vision within the traditional framework of romance story-telling. No one would wish to dispute the continuing influence of various traditions upon his art: thus, his descriptions, for all their originality, are functional in the manner in which description of place was regarded by the medieval rhetoricians: they enrich the narrative as well as placing it. Expectations are being fulfilled. But where previously there had been stereotypes, and where E. R. Curtius's assertion that "medieval descriptions of nature are not meant to represent reality"[18] properly applies, the *Gawain*-poet's "blend of realistic and romantic geography"[19] introduces verisimilitude. His landscapes owe a debt to real landscapes unlike those of so many other poets where it is always spring, where native and exotic animals sport unashamedly side by side, where unseasonal flowers inexplicably bloom in May. Whether the poet possessed what Curtius in the original version of his book called "Naturgefühl" ("ein Begriff," he adds, "der keineswegs geklärt ist"),[20] must of course remain a moot point, as we have no *Prelude* to guide us. Yet it is hard to believe that one who saw, *inter alia*, his native hills capped on a winter's morning with "a myst-hakel huge" (2081), a vast cloak of mist, responded merely mechanically to such impressions. What we may conclude with reasonable certainty is that the "realism" or, if we prefer it, the verisimilitude of the natural descriptions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* lies in those passages of the poem where a vision of a genuine (and still recognizable) northwest-midland English landscape breaks through the trappings of conventional *descriptio* and is expressed in vivid, sometimes unusual words, some of which can still be found on the map of that corner of Cheshire and north Staffordshire to which

18. E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (trans. W.R. Trask, London, 1953) p. 183.
19. J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London, 1965) p. 51; A. M. Markman, "The meaning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Publ. Mod. Lang. Assoc. of America* lxxii (1957) 574-86, had drawn a similar distinction between the "real" and "romantic" geography of the poem.
20. E. R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern, 1948) p. 190.

the poem has been authoritatively assigned on linguistic and graphemic grounds. The other poems in the manuscript have their memorable descriptions of storms and tempestuous seas, of secluded gardens and exuberant dream landscapes, but only in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does the reader feel that he or she is being deliberately taken into a particular region of England by a man who knew it intimately and probably lived there.

II

At the heart of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* lies the Green Chapel. In the opening fitt of the poem our eyes are directed towards it as the place whither the whole action of the poem tends. It is there that the "beheading game" will be played out:

"To þe grene chapel þou chose, I charge þe, to fotte
Such a dunt as þou hatz dalt", (451-2)

says the Green Knight's severed head ominously. The quest for the chapel takes place in the second fitt, and Sir Gawain does not rest until he is assured on reaching Bertilak's castle that the chapel "is not two myle henne" (1078). He does relax in the third fitt, but the proximity of the chapel is exerting a compelling influence: Sir Gawain is restless, worried about missing his tryst, nervous about his fate; and just as the hunting parties skirt the terrain of the chapel, so does the amorous dalliance between Sir Gawain and his hostess take place, as it were, in its shadow. Finally, Sir Gawain reaches the Green Chapel in the fourth fitt and the poem attains its climax and resolution.

The Green Chapel owes little to the Chapel Perilous of romance except its appellation and its lonely situation. Although only two miles from Bertilak's castle of Hautdesert, it is a world apart from its cosy and festive sociability. In fact, it is not a chapel at all but a natural part of the terrain whose oddest feature is its oddity. Sir Gawain, who is no fool, cannot make out what it is. He is depicted as

Debatande with hymself quat hit be myȝt, (2179)

and he might well wonder. The poet's own seeming hesitation is ascribed to Sir Gawain contemplating something that "hade a hole on þe ende and on ayþer syde" (2180), was overgrown with patches of grass, and is equivocally described as

nobot an olde caue,
Or a creuisse of an olde cragge. (2182-3)

A few lines previously the knight, looking around for a chapel, notices

a lawe as hit were;
A balʒ berʒ bi a bonke þe brymme bysyde,
Bi a forʒ of a flode þat ferked þare, (2171-3)

a description that has led many readers to regard the Green Chapel as a barrow or tumulus of the kind to be found in many parts of England. Admittedly, the word *berʒ*, from Old English *beorg*, can denote an artificial hillock or barrow, but the phrase "a balʒ berʒ" usually means a rounded hill in topographical occurrences,[21] and its combination with *law*, which in Middle English had lost its earlier associations with burial mounds, suggests that a rounded hill overlooks the stream (*brymme*) where Sir Gawain has halted. It is possible to visualize this scene as clearly as the poet did: Sir Gawain riding into a steep valley finds no chapel nor building of any kind but looking along the glade on the left, as he had been instructed to do, he sees a rounded hill overlooking the stream which ran there. He climbs up this hill and discovers holes leading into what appears to be a kind of hybrid between a cave and a crevice or fissure. That he has climbed quite a long way up is made clear by the reference to "þat hyʒe hil" in line 2199, from which he hears the strange noise on the opposite bank heralding the Green Knight's approach.

This piece of systematic topography points, I submit, very probably to a weird, legend-haunted natural "chapel" in the north Staffordshire moorlands, close to the Cheshire border, which is still very much part of the landscape, lies two miles from an enclosed park overlooked by a solid English *lawe*, and which in the fourteenth century had direct links with one of the oldest fords across the river Dee from Wales into Cheshire, some 30 miles due west along a familiar medieval route.

As early as the seventeenth century, the historian Robert Plot knew this "chapel" by a name which has at least something of a familiar ring: Lud-church, now generally Lud's Church or Ludchurch.[22] The element *lud* first appears

in the names Luddebroc and Ludebeche, both of which occur in the original charter by which Ranulph de Blundeville, earl of Cheshire, gave the lands for the building of the Cistercian abbey of Dieulacres near Leek in north Staffordshire, a few miles from Ludchurch.[23] The element *Lud* either represents a person's name, Lud(d)a, as in such place-names as Ludham, Ludworth, Luddington, or derives from the Old English word *hlūd* "loud" which also occurs in place-names, like Ludbrook, Ludford, Ludlow, Ludwell, all associated with streams.[24]

Ludchurch was part of the abbey's endowment and belonged to it until the Dissolution, and this establishes an immediate and important link with Cheshire and North Wales (Sir Gawain's "mapped" itinerary), for Dieulacres began its life at Poulton by the river Dee, some three and a half miles south of Chester, close to the place where at one of the oldest fords, Aldford, one of the oldest routes, Watling Street, crossed the river. But the men of North Wales proved uncongenial neighbours for the monks, hence the move, 68 years later, to the new site by the river Churnet, near Leek in the Staffordshire moorlands.

The Ordnance Survey map calls Ludchurch a cave, but it is no more and no less a cave than the *Gawain*-poet's peculiar "chapel". Plot described it as a "stupendous cleft in the rock"; geologically speaking, it is "a rent running through the third bed of millstone grit, along the line of strike for about 100 yards, from 30 to 40 feet in depth, and with a breadth of from six to ten feet. The walls are vertical and overhanging, and it gives the idea that the front of the hill has parted bodily from the main mass, leaving the fissure along the line of fracture,"[25]—in short "a crevice of an olde cragge". The place lent itself to the effusions of nineteenth-century romantic poets, regrettably not plentifully endowed with the *Gawain*-poet's genius:

As on he walks,
The still ascending path approaches straight
A rocky wall; then turns abrupt, and coasts
Along its base; till, presently, he sees
An opening in its face, half hid by gorse;

21. Thus A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, Part I, p. 18, s.v. *balg*.
22. R. Plot, *The Natural History of Staffordshire* (Oxford, 1686), p. 173.

23. This is printed in the *Calendar of Charter Rolls* vol. 4, as part of an Inspeximus held in 1330; also in Dugdale's *Monasticon*, vol. 5, p. 629.
24. See E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford, 4th ed., 1960) p. 306 f.
25. J. D. Sainter, *Rambles round Macclesfield* (Macclesfield, 1878) p. 39.

In which he enters; and, advancing, finds
Himself within a horrid chasm; its slimy walls,
On either side so close, afford him scarce
A passage; rising straight, and leaving but
A strip of sky between . . .
      Foul noisome plants,
That shun the light, find refuge here; and
    herbs . . .[26]

The verse is indifferent, but the impressions are accurate, particularly the impact of entering Ludchurch through the cave-like opening in the hillside; "hit hade a hole on þe ende"; which makes one wonder whether this is indeed "nobot an olde caue" until one penetrates into the "church" proper to find that Ludchurch is indeed that improbable combination, both cave and crevice. Once inside, one may turn left or right, and at either side there are holes ("and on ayþer syde"), one of them explored to some depth, as Sainter records, by some intrepid potholer. One can also climb upwards, at the southern end, to the roof of Ludchurch, as Sir Gawain did when he "romez vp to þe roffe of þe roʒ wonez" (2198).

The inside of Ludchurch is also convincingly like the Green Chapel of the poem:

Ouergrowen with gresse in glodes aywhere . . .
þis oritore is vgly, with erbez ouergrowen, (2181,2190)

according to one account: "An arch-like entrance forms the portal to a natural rocky aisle . . . The ravine in its course narrows and widens from two to ten yards, with sides sometimes perpendicular and sometimes overhanging from fifty to seventy feet in height. Creviced and crannied like tottering walls of masonry, every chink is occupied by a luxuriance of growth, which tends to soften the rugged lines of a craggy surface, being decked in summer time, not only with masses of feathery ferns and clusters of pendent grasses, but every ledge forming a bracket for some tree."[27] The "clusters of pendent grasses" provide a clue towards interpreting the *Gawain*-poet's word *glodes* as chinks in the rocky surface where a little light and less soil enable tufts of grass and patches of plants to grow.

In winter, when Sir Gawain keeps tryst at the Green

26. H. Green, *A Ramble to Ludchurch* (Manchester, 1871) pp. 10 f.
27. F. W. Hackwood, *Staffordshire Stories, Historical and Legendary*, (1906) pp. 16 f.

Chapel of the poem, Ludchurch is even more majestic, and indeed the entire neighbourhood is notorious for its massive snow drifts. Plot records a tale which may well be legendary but has its feet firmly in the local snow drifts nonetheless: Ludchurch, he writes in chapter iv of *The Natural History of Staffordshire*, "sometimes preserves *Snow* all the *Summer*, whereof they had signal proof at the *Town* of *Leek* on the 17 of *July* this *Fair day*, at which time of year a *Wharnford* Man brought a *Sack* of Snow thence, and poured it down at the *Mercat Cross*, telling the people that if anybody wanted of that *Commodity*, he could quickly help them to a 100 load on't". Leek and its environs know what it is to be cut off by snow from its neighbours, as did the *Gawain*-poet in his powerful evocations of winter landscapes:

þe snawe snitered ful snart, þat snayped þe wylde;
þe werbelande wynde wapped fro þe hyʒe,
And drof vche dale ful of dryftes ful grete. (2003-5)

Another landmark in the terrain of the Green Chapel has its persuasive analogue at Ludchurch. As Sir Gawain reaches the bottom of the valley, to which his guide has directed him, having descended along a watercourse or, depending on one's rendering of the word *rake*, a path, he looks to the left along the glade as he had been told to do:

þenne loke a littel on þe launde, on þi lyfte honde,
                                (2146)

and what he sees is vividly described by the poet in words already quoted, "ruʒe knokled knarrez with knorned stonez" (2166), rough craggy outcrops with gnarled stones. It seems to Sir Gawain as if the very skies were grazed by them. And just such a spectacle meets the eye as one descends into the Dane Valley below Ludchurch and looks up to the left: a crazy group of "tortured, twisted and blackened rocks" juts skywards,[28] their tops in winter often lost in swirls of mist. A faint resemblance to distant turrets and battlements has earned them the name of Castle Cliff Rocks. Today the path winding up through the trees on that rounded hillside overlooking the Dane passes these rocks as it leads to the cave-like entrance to Ludchurch and commands, on a clear day, sweeping views northwards across the moorland to the Alan Garner country of Shuttlingsloe, Wildboarclough, Thursbitch and Shining Tor.

But for the cloaks of mist just such a view might have

28. J. Dakeyne, *The legend of Ludchurch* (Buxton, 1907) p. 5.

opened up before Sir Gawain and his guide when their ascent from Bertilak's castle brought them to "a hille ful hyȝe" (2087) on the way to the Green Chapel. It is here that Sir Gawain is tempted yet again before his final encounter with the Green Knight, but he stoutly rejects his guide's offer to guard his secret should he agree to run away, and, having given directions to the Green Chapel, the guide gallops back across the snowy waste. The directions are brief and clear: "Ride down along this watercourse (or path) by the side of yonder rock until you reach the bottom of the wild valley. Then look a little along the glade, on your left, and you will see the very chapel in that valley and the massive man who guards it." Sir Gawain follows the course down the steep bank along the edge of the wood until he reaches the bottom where a stream rushes along the valley and where a waterfall appears to be cascading into it.29

It is by just such a route that one can today descend from the height of Roach End, with its commanding views, to the Forest Bottom ("þe boþem of þe brem valay," 2145) some 500 feet below, following the course of the Black Brook as it pours down to tumble into the river Dane below the rounded hillside in which Ludchurch lies concealed. Either interpretation of the word describing the confluence of the two streams suits the terrain: when in spate, the Black Brook certainly "falls" along its watercourse into the Dane. The banks here are densely wooded today, and both place-names and tradition testify to forest tracts in the Middle Ages in both the geographical and the legal sense. In the Back Forest above Ludchurch stands High Forest Farm, an old name describing part of what used to be the Abbot's Forest. We are here in fact right in the domain of the hunting monks of Dieulacres Abbey, as Bailiff William Davenport of Leek recorded in 1538: "In times past ye late Abbots of Dieulencresse had certeyn purlewes wtin ye seyd manor off Leeke, and had in ye same Hart, Hind, Buck and Doe, and theyr freholders off ye seyd hamlettes of Heyton and Rushton were theyre forresters; by occasion whereoff certain landes liying wtin ye seyd hamlett of ye frythe doe kepe ye name unto this day, and be called ye Abbotts forrest, off ye wch also part is calld ye hie forrest",30 and one of the

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29. Davis in the second edition of Tolkien and Gordon argues that the word is not *fors* "waterfall" (the later northern dialectal *force*), but derives from the Old English *furh* "furrow" in the sense of watercourse (note to line 2173). Editorial opinion tends to favour the former, but either seems possible.

30. See M. Bayliss, "Dieulacres Abbey," *N. Staffs. Jnl.*

charters in the Dieulacres Cartulary includes the Black Brook valley in the Abbot's Forest.31 It is interesting to note that the name of the High Forest, halfway between Ludchurch and Swythamley Park, is not unlike the poet's Hautdesert, literally High Wasteland or High Wilderness, a description that can appropriately be employed for the high moor and the forest tracts above the valley of the Dane.

Just two miles to the southwest Swythamley was in the fourteenth-century the nearest monastic outpost to Ludchurch. It is first noted as one of the hunting lodges of the earls of Chester, conveniently situated between their manor of Leek and the Forest of Macclesfield "wtout any Intervalle, save onely ye waters of Dane,"32 and it was here, according to tradition, that the fifth earl died in 1180-81.33 The tradition gains in credibility when it is recalled that it was the sixth earl, Ranulph de Blundeville, who founded Dieulacres and provided it with its original endowments in these parts. Swythamley was chosen as the site for one of the abbey's granges possibly because a nucleus of shelter already existed there. Nevertheless, the Cistercian vow to cultivate the wilderness must have been severely tested in these inhospitable regions. The name Swythamley itself probably represents an Old Norse *sviðinn* "land cleared by burning", which survives in dialectal *swithen* "a moor cleared by burning", and the Old English *lēah* "woodland, forest, rough and uncultivated natural open space in woodland".34 In due course a gabled mansion took the place of the former monastic buildings but was in turn destroyed by fire in 1813 to be replaced by the present somewhat gloomy mansion. There is a reference to "the Parkelaund . . . near Swythumley-graunge" in a sixteenth-century lease document, which recalls the *Gawain*-poet's use of *launde* and *park* in his description of Bertilak's castle. If the poet was thinking merely of any grassy slope, *launde* would do well enough as it does elsewhere in the poem; but if perchance he knew the cleared and ploughed land at Swythamley with its ridge and furrow, of which traces survive, then *launde* would have been an appropriate technical term to describe the gently sloping ploughed terrain.

Fld. Stud. 2 (1962), 83, and J. Sleigh, *A History of the Ancient Parish of Leek* (London 2nd ed., 1883) p. 20.

31. No. 27 in the Rudyard-Macclesfield version.

32. Bayliss, *op. cit.*

33. Variously recorded, for example by Sleigh, pp. 14, 20, or in R. K. Dent and J. Hill, *Historic Staffordshire* (Birmingham and London, 1896) p. 80.

34. Smith, Part II, pp. 18 and 170, s.vv. *lēah* and *sviðinn*.

That the monks and their *conversi* (as long as the latter existed) had good reason for venturing to the Forest Bottom below Ludchurch is likely enough, for there is evidence of ironstone having been found and worked there; a forge is still marked on an eighteenth-century map, and at least four forges are known to have been established across the river in the Forest of Macclesfield during the Black Prince's tenure of the earldom of Chester, the earliest reference being from the year 1353. Pieces of slag which had been subjected to the heat of a furnace have been found in the vicinity of the bridge spanning the Dane at Forest Bottom. Sleigh records the bridge as "casters' vel smelters' bridge" before the old stone bridge gave way to the present wooden one. It is still marked as Castor's Bridge on the 6-inch Ordnance Survey map. Plot mentions the good grinding stones found in the vicinity, and a short distance up the Dane lies Quarnford,[35] compounded of Old English *cweorn*, literally "hand-mill" but applied to any mill in topographical use, and 'ford'. If the *Gawain*-poet knew, as the monks of Dieulacres must have known, the mill and forge by the Dane, their sounds reverberating among the surrounding hills and vales might well have suggested the "wonder breme noyse" (2200) that greeted Sir Gawain's arrival at the Green Chapel and that calls up imagery of both water at a mill and of grinding and whetting "as . . . vpon a gryndelston" (2201-4). Not surprisingly perhaps Dorothy Everett speaks of the poet's "mind stored with unusually vivid memories of sight and sound; and he knew how to select the telling details and phrases that would convey them."[36]

As it was the Cistercians "who in the first instance developed our sheep-farming, iron-smelting and other industries,"[37] it is quite likely that members of the community of Dieulacres and its granges and other estates had business in these lonely tracts; nor can they have been wholly unafraid as they trudged up and down the banks. Ludchurch was hidden above their heads and Ludchurch was acquiring grim associations with Lollards, outlaws in hiding, a tall man in Lincoln green, the shooting of a young maiden, and other

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35. The variants Quarnford and Wharnford (as in Plot's story of the snow in July) illustrate the same alternatives that occur in our text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in pairs of words like *quene-whene* "queen" or, inversely, *when-quen* "when".
36. D. Everett, *Essays on Middle English Literature* (Oxford, 1955) p. 80.
37. H. E. Roberts, *Notes on the Medieval Monasteries and Minsters of England and Wales* (1949) p. 5.

disconcerting tales. In this respect too it is as intimidating as Sir Gawain's Green Chapel which, as his guide assures him, is shunned by all,

> be hit chorle oþer chaplayn þat bi þe chapel rydes,
> Monk oþer masseprest, oþer any mon elles.   (2107-8)

Similar lists occur elsewhere in alliterative poetry, as in *William of Palerne*, where clerk and knight and country churl figure, but the *Gawain*-poet seems to take special care to emphasize the clerical passers-by.[38]

How much historical truth there may be at the root of the various Ludchurch legends is impossible to discover. Staffordshire does not figure prominently in the history of early Lollardy, although adjoining counties do; yet at least one of those involved in the Oldcastle rising, Thomas Puttock, was apprehended in Staffordshire,[39] and for any fugitive Ludchurch provided excellent cover, as those who lived nearby must have known. A refuge for Lollards or any hunted man might well be described in Sir Gawain's words as " a chapel of meschaunce" (2195) or as the "corsedest", most accursed, church (2196). One of the stories tells of a tall forester clad in Lincoln green, another tells of an Earl Hugo, of Ludchurch used as a hideout, and of the appearance of a "gigantic figure". The echoes of the enigmatic "Hugo de" in the *Gawain*-manuscript and of the huge Green Knight are tantalising but can only lead to fanciful speculation.[40] The actual topography provides more persuasive parallels.

Such are, as a further example, the broad resemblances between the first part of the route followed by Sir Gawain and his guide as they set out for the Green Chapel. It is a passage, much quoted, rich in evocative detail:

> þay boȝen bi bonkkez þer boȝez ar bare,
> þay clomben bi clyffez þer clengez þe colde.
> þe heuen watz vphalt, bot vgly þer-vnder;
> Mist muged on þe mor, malt on þe mountez,

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38. See lines 1675-6 and 4029 of *William of Palerne*.
39. M. E. Aston, "Lollardy and Sedition 1381-1431", *Past and Present* 17 (1960) 25.
40. For details of some of the more colourful Ludchurch legends see the works by Green and Hackwood previously cited, and the following: P. Brocklehurst, *Swythamley and its Neighbourhood* (London, 1874) pp. 21 ff.; C. Masefield, *Staffordshire* (London, 2nd ed., 1918) p. 225; A. Mee, *Staffordshire* (London, 1937) p. 201; M. Paffard, "The Lollards' Valley of Legend", *Country Life* (19 October 1961) 952 ff.

Vch hille hade a hatte, a myst-hakel huge.
Brokez byled and breke bi bonkkez aboute,
Schyre schaterande on schorez, þer þay doun schowued.
Wela wylle watz þe way þer þay bi wod schulden,
Til hit watz sone sesoun þat þe sunne ryses
      þat tyde.
  þay were on a hille ful hyȝe,
  þe quyte snaw lay bisyde.

                      (2077–88)

This is "romantic" and "realistic" geography very much
intertwined, but the general upward movement along banks and
woodland, with streams cascading down the slopes, is clear
enough. The route from Swythamley to Roach End is much like
this, climbing some 600 feet in just over a mile, and it is
hard going in winter along a partly sunken track whence the
land slopes southward, steeply in places, towards Leekfrith.
To this day the names of farms and fields echo the *Gawain*-
poet's description: Clough Head, Gorsy Banks, Highridge,
Hillylees, Old Springs, Turbulent Meadow. At Roach End
several tracks meet and the modern traveller looking for
Ludchurch will need directing as much as Sir Gawain did.

    Swythamley itself boasts no castle, and it is in any
case doubtful whether any building in England as yet com-
bined much before 1400 all the features enumerated in the
description of Bertilak's castle in *Sir Gawain and the Green
Knight* and so magnificently painted in the illuminations to
the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*.[41] Castles of course
existed in the poet's neighbourhood. Anyone riding from
Chester towards Staffordshire would pass Beeston perched on
its rock and commanding the Cheshire plain for miles around.
Closer still to Dieulacres was John of Gaunt's castle of
Newcastle-under-Lyme, and his other castle of Tutbury to the
southeast was the Duchess Constance's frequent abode. At
Chartley, some 12 miles west of Tutbury, where the abbey had
possessions, a massive castle was perched on rising ground
above the Trent, and further afield were yet more of Gaunt's
strongholds: Melbourne and High Peak and Clitheroe and
others. At Kenilworth something very like the *Gawain*-poet's
"halle ful hyȝe" was built for John of Gaunt between 1390

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41. There is a good reproduction of the September miniature
in *The Flowering of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joan Evans (London,
1966) p. 135, of which C. Hohler writes (*ibid.* p. 134):
"Saumur was clearly capable of resolute defence, yet, with
its crested battlements and tall gilt weather vanes, it
might almost be the fairy-tale castle described in *Sir
Gawain and the Green Knight*."

and 1393, and there were of course domestic and monastic
buildings being erected, repaired, enlarged, all over the
country, some of them incorporating details akin to the
features mentioned by the poet.

    But Bertilak's castle remains a "fairy-tale castle",
however definitely the poet may have wished to localize its
site, and there are hints, both poetic and architectural,
which mark it as such. Sir Gawain's first glimpse of it, "as
hit schemered and schon þurȝ þe schyre okez" (772), shim-
mering and shining, reflected among the oak trees in the
snowy landscape, conveys a visionary quality rather than a
solid pile of masonry. This same quality is neatly summed up
at the end of the description by the suggestion of a sil-
houette in the allusion to a decoration cut out of paper:

  þat pared out of papure purely hit semed, (802)

a line which is first cousin to one in *Cleanness* (1408),
where the reference is to an elaborate table ornament which,
in view of the value of paper in the fourteenth-century,
constituted a considerable luxury. What Sir Gawain sees in
the poem is indeed a castle, magnificent, inviting, substan-
tial enough as a fact of narrative to house him for a week;
but the poet is seeing a vision, a silhouette, for the paper
image cannot sustain anything that has substance in the real
world, a world that was in any case not yet ready for such
an elaborate structure. The turreted, pinnacled, and chim-
neyed elegance of Bertilak's castle is a brilliant anticipa-
tion of what was to happen when the solid medieval strong-
hold of the past gave way to the castellated mansions of the
fifteenth-century, the era of Hurstmonceux, Raglan and
Tattershall. The signs of the transition were everywhere
apparent, even in the monasteries where towers and fan-
vaulted cloisters and elaborate gate-houses reflected an
increasing hankering for domestic comfort and luxury. With
his keen eye for detail the *Gawain*-poet, whoever he was,
could hardly help noticing these signs and, at the appropri-
ate moment, combining them into the Saumur-like vision that
is Bertilak's castle.

    There may be yet another hint of the castle's imaginary
nature which a contemporary audience would not have been
slow to take. The poet places his castle "abof a launde, on
a lawe", on a mound or hillock rising above the open ground,
yet apparently surrounded by a "double ditch" or moat. This
seems an unlikely combination, for contemporary castles sur-
rounded by moats or even lakes as at Kenilworth or Caer-
philly were not built on hills or other commanding sites but

on low ground.[42] There is thus a seeming incongruity between a doubly moated castle "pyched on a prayere" (768), erected on a meadow like Bodiam in Sussex, completed around 1390, and one "on a lawe" like Tutbury or Beeston, although at Beeston there is a stretch of moat guarding the entrance to the upper bailey. Whether the poet intended this as a deliberate incongruity or considered the combination architecturally feasible we cannot be sure; nor can we be certain that his knowledge of architectural refinements came to him from strictly architectural sources. The passage in *Cleanness* alluded to earlier includes a description of cups shaped like castles which were used at Belshazzar's feast and bear close resemblance to the castle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Several technical terms occur in both poems and the two descriptions are stylistically sufficiently akin to strengthen not only the commonly held assumption that both poems were written by the same man, but also the impression that in neither case are the castles intended to be in any sense "real". The vessels themselves were not imaginary, for the infiltration of architectural features into the design of cups, thuribles and other vessels dates back at least to the Romanesque period and by the fifteenth century had become exceedingly elaborate even down to "finely designed traceries reproducing those of contemporary windows".[43] But a cup, however skilfully worked to look like a castle, is no more a castle than is a shimmering silhouette that seems most elaborately cut out of paper.

In both poems the roll-call of architectural features is much closer to the enumerative listing of items in traditional *descriptio* than to the more "realistic" mode employed by the poet in depicting the various landscapes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It is noteworthy that those of his descriptions which possess the most vivid topographical verisimilitude owe least to tradition; hence there is considerable disparity between the description of Bertilak's castle and, for example, that of the Green Chapel and its surroundings. The latter, as we remarked, is selective, the eye travels from feature to feature not in any organized fashion, but picking out landmarks here and there as haphazardly as it would in real life. The former, on the other hand, has been aptly called "one of the best organized of medieval descriptions" in that "the eye first takes in the whole mass, then travels from the lowest point, where the

wall plunges into the moat, upwards to the ramparts, and then inwards to the various buildings within the wall. The passage ends with a summing up."[44] The difference might be succinctly characterized as between recollection and invention: the one scene actually exists, the other is imaginary.

Both architectural and stylistic evidence thus point to an imaginary castle, the traditional *locus amoenus* of medieval romance, but its setting shares the topographical verisimilitude of the Green Chapel and other locales in the poem. One critic speaks of the poet's immediate audience recognizing "that whereas the general area of Sir Gawain's search and the Green Chapel to which he comes in the end were real and recognizable places, there had never in the memory of man been a castle or any sign of one in the area."[45] This impression is shared by other readers, for the castle is not simply, as in other romances, "in þe wod". Certain topographical points are singled out: it stands in open ground (*launde, prayere*), the whole structure and the "park" surrounded by "a pyked palays", a spiked palisade of more than two miles in circumference. It is not difficult with the help of such landmarks to envisage the scene.

Swythamley Park, the site of the monastic grange in the fourteenth century, today resembles the poet's topographical sketch in several details.[46] It is open parkland for the most part with remnants of ridge and furrow corrugation, for which, as was noted earlier, *launde* was an appropriate Middle English term. The land rises to a central eminence which commands a panoramic southward view down the valley of Leekfrith towards the site of Dieulacres Abbey and Leek, about five miles distant, with the rocky escarpment of the Roaches to the east and the long ridge of Gun Hill to the west. This eminence has no name on the Ordnance Survey map, but the Staffordshire historian T. Pape records it as "Knight's Low",[47] a name that hauntingly echoes the *Lawe* of Sir Bertilak's castle. A little way below its summit a lot of stones, some of them evidently worked, are scattered around a circular depression and it is here that a cylin-

42. Cp. H. Braun, *The English Castle* (London 2nd ed., 1943) pp. 90 ff.

43. See the British Museum *Guide to the Medieval Room* (Oxford, 1907) pp. 80 f.

44. P. M. Kean, *The Pearl. An Interpretation* (London, 1967) p. 97 n.

45. John Gardner, *The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet* (Chicago and London, 1965) p. 29.

46. I wish here to record my gratitude to the late Sir Philip Brocklehurst, Bt., for his hospitality and for the opportunity to peruse documents relating to Swythamley Park.

47. T. Pape, "The Round-Shafted Pre-Norman Crosses of the North Staffordshire Area", *Trans. N. Staffs. Fld. Club* lxxx (1946), 37.

drical Anglo-Saxon cross shaft now stands which at some time in the nineteenth-century was brought across from Wincle, about a mile to the northwest on the Cheshire side of the Dane. Wincle was until the Dissolution a grange of the Cheshire Cistercian abbey of Combermere.

The original endowment of Swythamley grange was of two carucates, about 240 acres, according to the Taxatio Ecclesiastica of 1288-91. The present park shares approximately the dimensions of that described by the *Gawain*-poet, being surrounded by a wall of stone extending to a little over two miles. The poet's "two myle" in this instance, as well as in the distance from the castle to the Green Chapel, may of course be quite arbitrary. But in the latter instance it carries metrical as well as semantic stress, and in the description of the park it carries alliteration. In other words, the figure "two" must have been chosen with some care in both instances, and we are probably justified in treating it with greater respect than the occurrence of similar measurements in more fabulous contexts like Mandeville's prose description of the Great Chan's palace.[48]

That Swythamley lies at the heart of good hunting country, as does Sir Bertilak's castle, is evident from its pre-monastic history as a hunting lodge of the earls of Chester. Subsequently, the abbots and monks of Dieulacres not only hunted here, they also poached: "In the reign of Edward lst, the abbot of Dieulacres was indicted for that his dogs took two stags in the forest of Maxfilde--which stags were carried to his abbey and there by him received."[49] Three years later, in 1290, there was a similar charge. The proximity of the Royal Forest of Macclesfield just across the Dane proved an irresistible temptation, but according to some authorities there was no need to trespass, for venison may have been obtainable even closer to home.[50] The same is true also of the other game hunted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, boar and fox. There are local traditions of hunting from medieval to modern times to parallel the *Gawain*-poet's three vivid episodes,[51] and the

48. See *The Bodley Version of Mandeville's Travels*, ed. M. C. Seymour (E.E.T.S., O.S. 253, London, 1963) p. 123.
49. Quoted by Sleigh, p. 54 from Harleyan MS 2072.
50. See E. P. Shirley, *Some Accounts of English Deer Parks* (London, 1867) p. 178; L.M. Cantor, "The Medieval Deer Parks of North Staffordshire," *N. Staffs. Jnl. Fld. Stud.* 2 (1962) 72 ff. and 4 (1964) 61 ff.; and D.M. Palliser, *The Staffordshire Landscape* (London, 1976) pp. 89ff.
51. Brocklehurst, p. 34, tells of a wild-boar hunt in the seventeenth century beginning at Wildboarclough and ending

place-names of this neighbourhood tell their own stories-- names like Wildboarclough or Foxborough Wood just southeast of Swythamley or Foxt, a few miles from Leek, which like the Cheshire name Foxwist means the dwelling or lair of foxes.

Sir Gawain's approach to the castle mingles "romantic" and "realistic" elements in much the same way as does the ascent from the castle to the top of the hill where the guide leaves him. Again the general features of the terrain are easily visualized: the moss-covered valley between "hi3e hillez" (742) on either side, heavily wooded with huge oak trees and thick undergrowth of hazel and hawthorn, the ground often marshy and waterlogged--"þur3 mony misy and myre" (749)--the trees bare, the birds not chirping merrily as in the conventional romance landscape,[52] but "piping piteously for pain of the cold", miserable on bare branches. Like the fish in *Patience* (142-4) unable to find refuge amid the turbulent waves, so the birds in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* cannot escape the frost, and in both cases the poet is reflecting his hero's predicament within astonishingly realistic canons: "The landscape, subjected to close scrutiny or powerfully and suggestively distanced, is, by turns, local, identifiable, and more generally symbolic of states of mind, of emotions."[53] Although a wild forest is very much the staple of romantic adventure stories, this particular forest has its local counterpart, close to Swythamley and Ludchurch, in the Leekfrith of the fourteenth century.

The route from Dieulacres Abbey to Swythamley leads around Hillswood, a hill rising to some 850 feet, which could aptly be described in the poet's words "bi a mounte", into Leekfrith ("into a forest ful dep") which in medieval times was simply Le Frith. The *Gawain*-poet uses the word *fryth* later in the poem to refer to the forest around Bertilak's castle. It was a common Middle English word meaning woodland with more specific connotations of a royal forest or game preserve. Beyond Hillswood lie New Grange, also once part of the abbey's system of granges, and the ancient hamlet of Meerbrook. Thence the valley leads in a north-westerly direction towards Swythamley. Place-names both ancient and modern testify to the swampy terrain of the Frith: Meerbrook, possibly the boundary brook, or, very appropriately here, the brook by the pool, is recorded as

at an unidentified spot called "Kill Hill".
52. As they do, for example, incongruously contrasting with William's and Melior's distress in *William of Palerne*, 816-24.
53. Pearsall and Salter, p. 152.

Merebroke in 1338, and in 1543 occurs le Myres, echoing the poet's *myre*. There is still a place called The Marsh. To the poet's "hi3e hillez on vche a halue", on either side, correspond the length of Gun Hill to the west rising to over 1200 feet and on the eastern side the long range of rocky cliffs, known as the Roaches, which dominate the surrounding countryside at a height of over 1600 feet.

Vegetation is of course no certain guide to a particular locality as trees can be felled and plants die out, yet it is worth noting that oak, hazel, and hawthorn are plentiful in Leekfrith and were sufficiently conspicuous to be enshrined in place-names like the Hazelwood and Thorneyleigh of today, recorded as Hassylwood and Thorneley in the sixteenth century. The preponderance of these shrubs in this region is a common fact, as is the presence of oak which, together with ash, sycamore, and beech constitutes the principal deciduous foliage throughout the Peak District. Mosses also abound in the oakwoods of western England, and over 300 species were known in the Peak at the beginning of the twentieth century.[54] Whether the poet's word *raged* in the phrase "ro3e raged mosse" (745) simply means "ragged, shaggy", or specifies a particular tree-lichen, as has been suggested, or derives from a word surviving as *rag* in the neighbouring dialects of Derbyshire and Lancashire and meaning "hoar-frosted"--appropriate enough in the wintry context--cannot be determined for certain; any one of these senses adds something to the evocative picture of the poet's landscape.[55]

Swythamley Park, the modern descendant of the medieval monastic grange, thus offers a number of parallels in its surrounding countryside, some of them quite remarkable, with the central landscapes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Perhaps most significant is the link, through Dieulacres Abbey and its origins, in one direction with a ford across the Dee (yet to be more closely considered), and in the opposite direction with a weird, legend-haunted, natural "chapel" but two miles distant.

Of no less interest to our discussion is the role Swythamley played as a hunting lodge for the earls of Chester and as the gateway to good hunting country for the abbot and monks of Dieulacres and the guests who frequently joined in. Indeed, the "frequent visits of the people of the country, with grooms, horses and greyhounds" were sufficiently burdensome to Dieulacres and to some of the Cheshire monasteries to be the subject of an order sent in 1351 by the Black Prince to Thomas Ferrers, Justiciar of Chester.[56] In the poem, the terrain of the three successive hunts, respectively of deer, boar, and fox, is the only part of the total landscape which Sir Gawain does not himself explore. He remains at Sir Bertilak's castle, to be confronted by the allurements of his beautiful hostess, while his host and company traverse considerable stretches of the surrounding forest and moorlands in pursuit of their quarry. The three hunting episodes may be symbolically related to Sir Gawain's amorous predicament, as some critics have argued; in topographical detail they certainly show some interesting differences, appropriate to the beasts being pursued. The deer hunt, while sharing the exhilaration of the others, lacks any topographical specification; the boar hunt is rich in unusual landmarks, suggesting a definite route signposted, as it were, by reference to distinctive features in the landscape; the fox hunt is again less specific, erratic in its movement amid more commonplace natural features.

All three hunts begin by mentioning the Forest around the castle in specific terms: "in þat forest" (1149), "to þe wod" (1415), "in þis holt" (1677), also referred to as "þat fryth" in the course of the boar hunt. Around Swythamley this corresponds to Le Frith to the south, as we have seen, and to the north to the Forest of Macclesfield, ancient hunting grounds of earls and kings, with its rich array of names echoing ancient sports: Hawk Green, Todd Brook, Cat Tor, Fox Hill, Wildboar3lough, and the rest. The deer hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* involves entire herds, whereas the two other hunts follow single beasts, hence its movement is different and the terrain inevitably more generic, less sharply visualized. Hunters and hounds pursue their quarry "in þe hy3e", "to þe depe sladez", "to þe wattrez", which despite the definite articles defy not only identification but even precise envisaging. It is a rushing up hill and down dale, lightly sketched, not made concrete in terms of landscape, although the sound effects are splendidly realized, not least the echoing cries resounding as if to burst the cliffs.

The two later hunts also pass along resounding cliffs, twice referred to idiosyncratically as *rocherez*, once with

54. On the flora of the area see K. C. Edwards, H. H. Swinnerton, and R. H. Hall, *The Peak District* (London, 1962) pp. 63, 83, 96 f., etc.

55. See C. A. Luttrell, "The Gawain Group. Cruxes, Etymologies, Interpretations," *Neophilologus* 39 (1955) 210 f., and E. M. Wright, "Notes on Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight," *Englische Studien* 36 (1906) 217.

56. M. J. C. Fisher, *Dieulacres Abbey, Staffordshire* (Leek, 1969) pp. 36 f.

the definite article as if to suggest familiarity, while in the fox hunt there is reference also to "alle þe clamberande clyffes", the clustering cliffs (1722). Once the word *rocher* also occurs in the singular to point to what is obviously a landmark in the terrain of the boar hunt:

þer as þe rogh rocher vnrydely watz fallen. (1432)

The two plural occurrences probably denote a rocky bank or escarpment, as Mrs. Wright first suggested in 1906.[57] The word is not listed among the English place-name elements and is certainly not a common literary term.[58] The *Gawain*-poet appears to differentiate it carefully from the more ordinary words *roche* and *rokke*, both meaning "rock". In north Staffordshire, overlooking Leekfrith from the northeast, there is such a rocky bank or escarpment corresponding to the poet's *rocherez*. Known as the Roaches, it is sufficiently spectacular to have been commented on by travellers for centuries past. Dr Plot speaks of them in terms that echo the *Gawain*-poet's later line

þe skwez of þe scowtes skayned hym þoȝt, (2167)

"kissing the *clouds* with their tops, and running along in mountainous *ridges* for some miles together". Below the escarpment, about halfway between Meerbrook and Swythamley lay another outpost of Dieulacres Abbey, Roach Grange; and at the northern end of the Roaches the track from Swythamley to the Forest Bottom and thence to Ludchurch reaches its highest point at Roach End which has already figured in our discussion. The Roaches are rather more accessible now than they were in Plot's time, who describes them as "hardly passable", but they still dominate the countryside above Leek just as the *Gawain*-poet's *rocherez* dominated the terrain of the hunts around Hautdesert.

The single "rogh rocher" noted by the poet, "fallen in confusion", witnesses to the several masses of tumbled rocks which lie scattered in the vicinity of the Roaches. G. A. Cooke, early last century, described them thus: "Here, single blocks, the size of church steeples, may be seen overhanging the precipice, and threatening destruction to all approachers; and some of prodigious bulk have absolutely

rolled down and been broken to pieces."[59] One such mass of "confused" rocks, the Ramshaw Rocks, lies to the east of the Roaches, overlooking a stretch of Roman road that is now the A53 from Leek to Buxton, and further to the north is the evocatively named solitary Ann Roach, probably meaning something like "one *rocher*" to which the *Gawain*-poet's line provides apt parallel. More spectacular still, albeit less of a "confused" mass, is the huge solitary rocky crag called Hen Cloud (Old English *hēan clūd*, "high rocky hill") which lies at the southern end of the Roaches but forms a detached mass overlooking the headwaters of the Churnet and the vast stretches of moorland to the south and east. There is even a striking example of G. A. Cooke's "overhanging" block in the Hanging Stone less than a mile north of Swythamley, a pile of rocky fragments of great size, rising to some 30 feet above the surface of the hillside on which it perches. Near its base several ancient coins were discovered in 1834.[60] Whether any of these spectacular rocks inspired the *Gawain*-poet's solitary "rogh rocher vnrydely . . . fallen" we cannot of course be sure; what is certain, however, is that any receptive artist writing about forest and moorland hunts in this region in the late fourteenth century would have found enough such landmarks to stimulate his imagination.

This also holds true for some of the more unusual aspects of the terrain traversed during the boar hunt. The movement of this hunt is noticeably different from that of the others in its grand sweeps around the hills and along the edges of swamps and in the ferocious forward thrust of the hunted beast, conveyed by verbs not used in the other hunts, like *sweyed*, literally "swayed" forward and around, or *swyngez*, literally "swings" along the banks. Among the features encountered is "a flosche", a swamp or marshy place, a word rare in poetry but not uncommon in place-names in areas of Scandinavian settlement. The north Staffordshire village of Flash, once notorious for its associations with counterfeit money, lies to the northeast of the Roaches, and neighbouring farm names like Flash Back and Flash Bottom give some indication of the original extent of the marshy terrain.

Two other features, closely associated, are the poet's "a knot" and "þe knarre", both words referring to rocky formations of some sort. The former is probably a hillock or rocky hill, a sense found in a few northern place-names, including the curious Knotbury, a plateau just beyond Flash

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57. Wright, 218, and cp. the *English Dialect Dictionary*, s.v. *rocher*.
58. The only occurrences known to me are in successive lines (7081-2) in the metrical romance *Kyng Alisaunder*.

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59. G.A. Cooke, *A Topographical and Statistical Description of the County of Stafford* (London, 1810) p. 109.
60. See the account and picture in Brocklehurst, pp. 37 ff.

with its semi-circular lay-out of tracks and fields and houses around Knotbury Common. The word *knot* does not figure in this sense in any other Middle English poet's work; its use here suggests that the *Gawain*-poet was using local topography and sharing his knowledge with his audience. The other word, *knarre*, is used altogether three times in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: first in the more general context of Sir Gawain's journey from Camelot as he confronts wild creatures living in *knarrez*; secondly in the boar hunt; and finally to refer to the rough craggy outcrops of rocks in the vicinity of the Green Chapel. In Middle English poetry the word apparently occurs only once elsewhere, in the thirteenth-century poem *The Owl and the Nightingale* where it is a deliberate northernism. It is not common in place-names either, but occurs as the name of a farm, Knar, about a mile west of Knotbury. The name does not seem to be attested before the nineteenth century, but documentation of local names in this stretch of the moorlands is very scanty on either side of the Dane which here forms the county boundary between Staffordshire and Cheshire.

The hunters in the poem "vmbekesten þe knarre and þe knot boþe" (1434), moved around them searching for the boar, then followed him across country, "ouer þe londez" and "bi þe bonkkez" until he is trapped in "a hole in a water-course near a rock where the stream flows" (1569-70). The topography of this scene, where the boar meets his end in midstream at the hand of Sir Bertilak, has puzzled readers and critics alike. The hole cannot be a cave, for the boar does not find refuge in it; instead he turns his back to the bank and confronts his pursuer. The poet appears to visualize the scene quite clearly; he speaks of "the" stream, although none has been previously mentioned, yet again, so it appears, sharing local knowledge with his audience.

There is, just south of Knar Farm, a stretch of upper Dane Valley which provides an instructive parallel to the scene which the *Gawain*-poet is describing in this episode. Known as Pinchers Hole, the valley at this point does not feature a hole in the sense of a cave or cavern, but rather a hollow between the banks into which a hunted beast could be driven and in which it could be contained until slain. No early forms of the name seem to be known,[61] but "pinching"

is attested in hunting contexts from the Middle Ages in the sense of hounds pressing upon and seizing their game, a specializing of the more general meaning of "pinch" as to press, compress, or seize. It is thus employed in the fifteenth-century *The Master of Game* and similarly in later literature. To be brought to bay in such a "hole" makes sense of the boar's final moments in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the impossibility of escape, for the banks are steep and the "exits" guarded upstream and downstream, the last stand, back to bank, the impotent scraping, the kill "in þe wyȝtest of þe water", the swiftest part of the stream. It is quite conceivable that some medieval hunt finished in this hollow of the Dane Valley and endowed it with the curious name Pinchers Hole.[62]

Compared with the more eclectic terminology and unusual landmarks of the boar hunt, the third day's hunting is a jumble of fast-moving, fleeting impressions, as the fox darts and leaps from cover to cover. Starting yet again at the edge of a wood, with the sound of horns reverberating from the "rocheres", the chase develops into a rapid succession of thickets and hedges, a little ditch, the edge of a marsh, clustering cliffs, and much brushwood and undergrowth providing momentary protection for the hunted beast. Significantly, only the major features, the forest and the hills, are this time denoted by definite articles; everything else is left indeterminate, deliberately vague. Whereas the boar hunt seems to have followed a definite route, almost signposted by recognizable landmarks, the fox hunt is an erratic and unmapped pursuit of a devious prey.

The descriptions of the three hunts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* create impressions of the general terrain of hills and moors, of forest and rocky cliffs, and more particular pictures of specific landmarks referred to in several instances in terms that are unusual, even exceptional, in Middle English poetry. That these terms appear embedded in the map of this corner of England where east Cheshire adjoins north Staffordshire may be pure coincidence, for they are not unique in English toponymy; but if taken in conjunction with other parallels we have noted between the poem and this locality, the probability is strengthened that the *Gawain*-poet knew these landscapes and recreated them in his poem.

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61. J. McN. Dodgson, *The Place-Names of Cheshire* (Cambridge, 1970-81) vol. I, p. 162, does not record any earlier forms of the name, but a possible parallel may exist in the late fifteenth-century name Le Pyncher Clogh in Northwich hundred in Cheshire, which Dodgson not very convincingly glosses "perhaps 'miser's dell'," vol. II, p. 197.

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62. Alternatively, this could derive from a personal name, or possibly from the hypothetical Old English *pinc* "a minnow", but the latter, as Smith notes, presents phonetic difficulties (Part II, p. 65, s.v. *pinc*).

III

The Cistercian abbey of Dieulacres, which has figured repeatedly in the preceding pages, began its life in 1146 at Poulton by the river Dee, some three to four miles south of Chester. Its founder was a wealthy landowner, Robert Pincerna, who held the hereditary office of butler in the household of the earls of Chester. To the latter, some time after Robert's death, passed the rights of protection and custody of the new foundation. In April 1214, the abbot and his monks moved to a new site, given to them by Earl Ranulph de Blundeville, in order to escape from the incursions of Welsh raiders as the Chronicle of Dieulacres Abbey records.[63] The new site was in the Churnet Valley at the outskirts of the manor of Leek in north Staffordshire.

The abbey's Cheshire endowments remained in its possession until the Dissolution in 1538-9. These included not only the original monastic site at Poulton, but lands some distance away in east Cheshire at Alderley and Byley, as well as fishing rights along the Dee, saltpits at Nantwich and Middlewich, pasture rights within a few miles of Macclesfield, and property in Chester. Other endowments came later, and with considerable possessions on the Fylde coast in Lancashire, centred on the manor of Rossall, its extensive properties and rights in Staffordshire, a house in London, and the income derived from these sources, Dieulacres soon succeeded in changing its status, as M. J. C. Fisher puts it, from that "of a small refugee community to that of a great abbey possessing resources unparalleled by any other religious house in the county".[64] The growth of the abbey's estates and the retention of the original property at Poulton entailed regular communication between the abbey itself and its various possessions, and as late as the year 1504 the lease of the manor of Poulton stipulated that the abbot along with 12 mounted companions should be entertained there for six days twice a year, "wine, fresh salmon and oysters excepted",[65] and similarly the cellarer and other servants of the house who might have business at Poulton. The latter lay due west of Dieulacres, and the most familiar route linking the two places in the Middle Ages was

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63. For the history of Dieulacres Abbey, see Fisher, *passim*. The Dieulacres Chronicle is Gray's Inn MS No. 9; it is described by M. V. Clarke and V.-H. Galbraith, "The Deposition of Richard II," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 14 (1930) 125 ff. See also Bayliss, *passim*.
64. Fisher, p. 22.
65. Bayliss, 84.

the Earlsway, a major medieval road probably so called because it linked the east and west midland estates of the earls of Chester.[66] It led almost due east from Chester and passed into north Staffordshire below Congleton and within a short distance of Leek and the abbey lands near it, thence continuing southeastward towards Derby. It was the obvious route from Wirral to a "Green Chapel" familiar to the *Gawain*-poet in the nearest region to the river Dee that boasted hills and vales and *rocheres* such as the poem describes.

Poulton is now a collection of farms (one of them Chapelhouse Farm) in the low-lying country along the Dee halfway between the foothills of the Welsh mountains to the west and the Peckforton, Bickerton, and Broxton range to the east. It is land criss-crossed by small streams, with numerous place-names testifying to ancient fords: Pulford, Marford, Gresford, and more particularly Aldford across the Dee itself. Aldford was old indeed: Watling Street, which had led across the river at Chester by Bridge Gate, here crossed the Dee again just north of Aldford church.[67] A medieval traveller approaching along another ancient route through northern North Wales from the direction of Anglesey and St. Asaph would travel parallel to the Dee estuary to meet the north-south road between Aldford and Chester, within a mile or two of the old abbey lands at Poulton, cross the Dee either at Aldford or in Chester itself, and then gain the Earlsway towards the east. There is good reason to believe that the *Gawain*-poet had this route in mind.

Having left "all the isles of Anglesey" on his left, Sir Gawain, so we are told,

> farez ouer þe fordez by þe forlondez,
> Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
> In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale, (699-701)

a description which fits the local topography to a nicety. The words "þe fordez", in the plural and with the definite article, suggest that the poet had at least two fords definitely in mind, and our "medieval traveller" coming along the route described would have to negotiate at least two fords. The word *forlondez* is common neither as a literary nor as a topographical term. It is best explained as an anglicizing of Old Norse *forlendi* "land between sea and

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66. Cp. *Victoria County History of Staffordshire*, vol. 2, p. 279, and Palliser, pp. 79-81.
67. See I. D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain* (London, 3rd ed., 1973) p. 297.

hills" with the general meaning in Middle English of low-lying country between hills and sea or river. A similar word, *farlande*, occurs three times in the alliterative poem *Morte Arthure* with reference to the same general locale. Here, however, two references are clearly to St. Michael's Mount, the very opposite of low-lying country, and the other instance is at least ambiguous. Probably the sense of "far or distant place" is the most appropriate in *Morte Arthure*, which leaves the *Gawain*-poet's word unique in Middle English literature and toponymy. In the context of the poem the general meaning of low-lying land between hills and water is etymologically acceptable and makes good sense of the Dee Valley just south of Chester.

To look for a "Holy Head" in this locality is probably vain as there is no such place, and none of the ingenious suggestions hitherto offered has succeeded in satisfactorily explaining the poet's words or how the place which they may be meant to designate fits into the topographical scheme of the poem. The poet's use of the definite article, "*the* holy hede", is presumably deliberate, for apart from the grammatically similar "þe Norþe Walez", the poet does not use the definite article with place-names, whether ancient (Troye, Rome), or contemporary (Anglesay, Wyrale), or legendary (Camylot, Logres), nor does the scribe employ capital letters for "þe holy hede" or for the place-names. But "hede" has other meanings beside the physical one, and the sense of "beginning, source, fountain-head" is not unknown in Middle English.[68] Thus the phrase "þe holy hede" is as likely to point to a place so called as to some locale representing a source or fountain-head made holy by appropriate associations. To someone looking westwards from Dieulacres Abbey, Poulton was indeed the holy head, the source or origin of this house, and it could with all propriety be thus described.

Sir Gawain gains the opposite bank of the Dee in "þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale". Today we naturally think of Wirral as co-extensive with the peninsula between Dee and Mersey now shared by Cheshire and Merseyside. This does not include the area south of Chester, towards Pulford and Aldford, which lie not in Wirral but in Broxton hundred. But the poet's reference is neither to the peninsula nor to the hundred; he is speaking of "the wilderness" of Wirral, a term which could be interpreted as pointing to the original Forest of Wirral whose southern boundary, like some of the other forest boundaries in Cheshire, has not been easy to define.[69] But as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was

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68. See the *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *hed*, 6(a).
69. "Evidence respecting the bounds (and therefore the

probably composed some time after the disafforestation of Wirral, reference to "the wilderness" might well be a general pointer to the whole district west of the Gowy, where the forest of Delamere began, and even to the entire county of Cheshire beyond. The poet's allusion to this notoriously lawless corner of England follows immediately upon his mention of Wirral:

> wonde þer bot lyte
> þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied,
>
> (701-2)

but lawlessness was not confined to the Wirral peninsula or within the bounds of the original forest. There were disturbances caused by armed bands in Nantwich hundred in 1386, in the manor of Frodsham in 1391, and in the hundreds of Edisbury and Macclesfield in 1392, the year before John of Gaunt's expedition to the county. At the turn of the century, complaints from neighbouring counties still speak of robbers finding refuge in the Palatinate.[70] The petition of the commonalty of Wirral to Edward III in 1376 or 1377 to confirm by assent of Parliament his Charter of Disafforestation admittedly speaks of the damage and destruction caused by wild beasts ("savagyns"), but no doubt the depredations of marauders and free-booters and the common desire to be free from the restrictive laws of the forest also played their part.[71] The monks of Dieulacres Abbey travelling between their possessions on the Dee and their abbey in the Staffordshire moorlands were just as likely to meet "savagyns" and marauders in the intervening wilderness as was Sir Gawain riding from the Dee to his rendezvous at the Green Chapel, hazards vividly described by the poet in 715-23. Even the reference to giants pursuing Sir Gawain from

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area) of the Cheshire forests is somewhat unsatisfactory," writes H. J. Hewitt, *Medieval Cheshire* (Manchester, 1929) p. 169. Cp. also B. M. C. Husain, "Delamere Forest in later medieval times", *Trans. Hist. Soc. of Lancs and Cheshire* 107 (1956) 23.
70. See P. McNiven, "The Cheshire Rising of 1400", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 52 (1970) 379, 384; and H. L. Savage, "A Note on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 700-2", *Mod. Lang. Notes* xlvi (1931) 455-7. The accuracy of the Dieulacres Chronicle in its accounts of events in Cheshire proves that the monks were quite familiar with the area.
71. Both Charter and Petition are printed in translation by R. Stewart-Brown, "The Disafforestation of Wirral", *Trans. Hist. Soc. of Lancs. and Cheshire* 59 (1907) 170 ff.

"þe heȝe felle" has its counterpart in the local legend of the red-headed giant associated with the neighbourhood of Beeston Castle towering on its "high fell" above the Cheshire plain.[72]

The history of Dieulacres Abbey parallels that of other Cistercian houses in its growth of wealth and importance and eventual decline. There was much litigation which must have fostered among its members and associates the same familiarity with legal language evinced by the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. There was even a particularly unsavoury case involving the abbot and other members of Dieulacres in which a local man of some standing was beheaded on Leek Moor on the Ashbourne road in 1379. Initially, the Norman earls of Chester and later the royal patrons took an interest in the abbey as is shown by Henry III's grant in perpetuity of the Rossall estates and Edward I's free-warren charter. Both Edward III and the Black Prince contributed generously towards the building of the great new abbey church in the fourteenth century. On the other hand, there were some impositions, like the corrodies which the abbey had to provide at the king's command to royal pensioners. Between 1380 and 1399 Richard II had three corrodians at Dieulacres, one a Royal Sergeant, another a Yeoman of the King's Chamber. It is possible, as Michael J. Bennett has suggested, that the *Gawain*-poet should be sought among these or other Cheshire, Staffordshire, or Lancashire beneficiaries of Richard's favour.[73]

Of the monastic buildings only the barest traces now remain. Among the remnants discovered early last century were sculptured stones, including interestingly enough a carving of a green man, floor tiles, one sporting a stag, another two dogs, and pieces of painted and stained glass.[74] Today the gateway to the seventeenth-century farmhouse occupying the site, made up of various fragments of original stonework and sculpture, is the best preserved survival. Part of the abbey church roof now covers the north aisle of

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72. See T. A. Coward, *Cheshire. Traditions and History* (London, 1932) pp. 138-9.
73. See especially Michael J. Bennett, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the literary achievement of the north-west Midlands: the historical background", *Journal of Medieval History* 5 (1979) 63-88; and "Courtly Literature and North-west England in the Later Middle Ages", *in* Glyn S. Burgess, ed., *Court and Poet* (Liverpool, 1981) pp. 69-78.
74. See J. A. Blackwell, "Ancient Remains of Dieulacresse Abbey, Staffordshire", *The Gentleman's Magazine* (February 1819) 120-22.

Astbury church near Congleton in Cheshire. It is difficult from these few remains, to reconstruct in one's imagination an 'imposing Cistercian house',[75] but such Dieulacres undoubtedly was.

Of the abbey's library there remains only the Dieulacres Chronicle, now in Gray's Inn, which in the seventeenth century belonged to a member of the Cheshire family of Bostock.[76] Any other manuscripts that may have survived the Dissolution must have similarly passed into secular ownership. There is no known link between Dieulacres and its estates and the sole surviving manuscript containing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the Cotton collection in the British Library. But it may be of interest to note that the manor and chapel of Poulton were granted by Henry VIII to Sir George Cotton and his wife Mary in 1544, with licence to grant Poulton to Thomas Grovenor, and that Wincle Grange, across the Dane from Swythamley, was also acquired by the Cottons as part of the Combermere estate. The site of Dieulacres Abbey itself was for a short time in the possession of Edward Stanley, third earl of Derby, who held the office of Steward of Dieulacres and who married his third wife Mary, the daughter of Sir George Cotton.[77] In 1552 the abbey site was granted by the crown to Sir Ralph Bagnall of Newcastle-under-Lyme and since then it has changed owners many times.

Swythamley Grange came into the possession of the Trafford family by grant of Henry VIII to William Trafford whose brother Henry was at some time rector of Bolton-Percy in Yorkshire and Chancellor of York. It was in Yorkshire that the *Gawain*-manuscript was first located in the library of Henry Savile of Bank (1568-1617), "a great collector who secured rich spoils from the Northern monasteries and abbeys,"[78] some of which have been traced much further afield, including manuscripts from Ely, Abingdon, and

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75. F. A. Hibbert, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries, as illustrated by the Suppression of the Religious Houses of Staffordshire* (London, 1910) p. 172.
76. N. R. Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries I (London)* (Oxford, 1969) p. 59.
77. For more particulars regarding the pedigrees of the Cotton family of Combermere in Cheshire see G. Ormerod's *The History of the County Palatine and City of Chester* (2nd ed. by T. Helsby, London, 1882) vol. 2, pp. 414-16. Sir Robert Bruce Cotton, founder of the Cottonian Collection, was descended from another branch of the same family.
78. Sir I. Gollancz in his introduction to the facsimile edition of the manuscript (E.E.T.S. 162, London, 1923) p. 7.

Canterbury, as well as York, Fountains, Rievaulx, and other houses.[79] How the manuscript came from Henry Savile's library into the possession of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton we do not know. It is just possible that Savile's manuscript was not the same as that now in the British Library. In the catalogue of Savile's library in MS Harl. 1879 the entry describing it has a marginal note "4 paper" against it, whereas the MS Cotton Nero A.x is on vellum. Sir Israel Gollancz put forward an ingenious explanation to account for the "mistake" and this has been generally accepted.[80] But a trace of doubt remains, and it is just conceivable that the surviving manuscript containing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* came to Cotton through some family connection from the confiscated estates of a long since vanished abbey in the northwest midlands.

IV

In the preceding pages mere conjecture has been, as much as possible, avoided. There is no suggestion that the *Gawain*-poet was a Cistercian monk or that the poem was composed for a particular occasion at a particular abbey or at some castle belonging to John of Gaunt or any other nobleman who possessed estates in that corner of England where *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* most probably originated. All these are possibilities. What I have tried to do is endow with substance the widely held conviction that the *Gawain*-poet's landscapes owe some of their unique ingredients to familiarity with local scenery. That the conviction is indeed widely held must be obvious to anyone conversant with recent criticism of the poem and will have become apparent from some of the views cited in this chapter. Here is the most recent to clinch the point: "No other poem in the Cotton manuscript gives real place-names or seems to refer to local landmarks. In leaving Camelot, the poem's location changes from the world of romance to the world of the fourteenth-century northwest midlands. Gawain moves through a

79. See J. P. Gilson, "The Library of Henry Savile, of Banke", *Trans. of the Bibliographical Society* ix (1908) 127-210.

80. In his edition of *Patience* (1913) p. 1. Dr. M. R. James, in a typed note appended to the Bodleian copy of the *Transactions* containing J. P. Gilson's article, endorses the explanation that the marginal note represents a misreading of the word *pay*, the last word in the opening line of *Pearl* which is the first poem in the manuscript.

landscape which is real or apparently real—the literary status is the same—and in coping with the wilderness of the Wirral or the dangerous fords of the Dee he is subjected to terrors just as real, and as unamazing, as those which the audience might then have met. Even the meeting in the Green Chapel, although a romantic event, may take place in a local landscape."[81]

There is good reason why the reader of this poem holding such a conviction should seek to understand the poet's possible motives for introducing real place-names at the beginning of Sir Gawain's quest, for such was certainly not common romance practice. Place-names do occur in other romances, but not as part of a systematic geography endowed with circumstantial detail. It is as if the poet were deliberately alerting his audience to a specific locale which acts as a signpost eastwards straight to some peculiar natural "chapel", just as the narrative itself, as has been suggested, proceeds fitt by fitt on its fated course towards the final encounter at the Green Chapel. Once thus alerted, a local audience would know where to look. The explicit localizing of Sir Gawain's crossing of the Dee in an easterly direction makes artistic sense only if it provided for the original audience a link with the episodes that follow, set as these are in landscapes depicted in a manner very different from that of the poet's contemporaries, a manner suggesting both the poet's own familiarity with these landscapes and his audience's likely recognition of them. Such a link undoubtedly existed for anyone connected with the abbey of Dieulacres between "the holy head" at Poulton by the Dee and the weird "chapel" at Ludchurch in the moorlands of north Staffordshire.

Why such recognition was important to the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* we may never be able to discover. Perhaps the celebration of some local event called for the story to be firmly planted in the local soil; perhaps the familiar landscapes themselves conveyed to the poet some of that same awe experienced by Robert Plot in the seventeenth century and by others since. In our own century another talented story-teller, Alan Garner, has responded to them in ways not unlike the *Gawain*-poet's, a fact that has not gone unnoticed.[82] One thing is certain. It is still

81. E. Wilson, *The Gawain Poet* (Leiden, 1976) p. 114.
82. Stephen Medcalf notes that the region which I would conveniently call the "Gawain country" is "rather gratifyingly" the same as that in Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*. See *The Medieval World*, ed. D. Daiches and A. Thorlby (London, 1973) p. 691, note 67.

possible today to trudge through deep snow across these moorlands on New Year's Day amid the hills shrouded in mist, and to share the wonder as well as the discomforts which, according to this great unknown poet, Sir Gawain experienced as he braved the hazards of his mid-winter quest for the Green Chapel.[83]

5. THE SCANDINAVIAN INFLUENCE:

SOME NORTHERN LANDSCAPE FEATURES

IN 'SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT'

Norse influence on the vocabularly of Middle English alliterative poetry has long been recognized and even calculated statistically,[1] and there is no need to plough the same half-acre again. What the present chapter aims to do, therefore, is to glance instead at one small corner of the field, the topographical vocabulary, and try to assess what it contributes in artistic terms to one Middle English alliterative poem of the late fourteenth century, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The landscapes in this poem are of two distinct types. On the one hand there are highly evocative descriptions of a rather general kind in which the enumerative method familiar in much medieval poetry predominates. On the other hand there are passages in which the poet describes terrain of which he appears to have a clear mental image, enabling his listener or reader to form a distinct picture of the landscape depicted. The poet does this by selecting topographical features with obvious care and on several occasions calling them by rather unusual names. This distinction in the description of scenery in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* corresponds to other aspects of the poem's binary character to which several recent critics have drawn attention. Thus J. A. Burrow, for example, speaks .of "two distinct 'modes' . . .—an older 'romantic' mode (associated with the superlative hero and the superlative test) and a newer 'realistic' mode (associated with the partial failure

1. Thus J. J. Anderson writes: "*Patience* has a total of some 1200 different words. . . . Of these, about 100 words (8%) are from O.N., the proportion being much the same as in *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and slightly higher than in *Pearl*." *Patience*, p. 73.

in the test)".[2] In topographical terms these two modes find expression in what Burrow elsewhere (p. 51) calls the "blend of realistic and romantic geography", a distinction also made by Alan A. Markman.[3] To the "romantic" mode belong Sir Gawain's "anious uyage" (535), the wild forest with its *locus amoenus*, the architecturally *avant-garde* castle "in þe best lawe", and the evocative ascent to the "hille ful hyʒe" on the approach to the Green Chapel, made up of such powerful poetic ingredients as

> Mist muged on þe mor, malt on þe mountez,
> Vch hille hade a hatte, a myst-hakel huge.
> (2080-1)

To the "realistic" mode belong Sir Gawain's journey to and through the Wirral, several details of the hunting episodes, notably the terrain of the boar hunt, the guide's directions towards the Green Chapel in 2144 ff., and the locality of the Green Chapel itself.

Among the stylistic differences perhaps the most noticeable are a closer adherence to more traditional methods of rhetorical *descriptio loci* in the "romantic" landscape passages, and a heavier reliance upon more common words and alliterative formulae. The description of Hautdesert, for example, may be termed an architectural vision presented in a largely enumerative manner heightened with the help of several metaphorical phrases like pinnacles *poudred* everywhere, or the whole castle looking as if it were "pared out of papure". The castle is the *locus amoenus* of the romance, as mentioned previously, but the modernity of its architecture seems to place Sir Gawain's quest into the poet's own time, and the visionary castle is itself planted firmly upon a solid English *lawe* in a park, enclosed and measured, all of which illustrates how easily the poet's "romantic" and "realistic" modes are made to shade into one another.

The "ascent" passage from Hautdesert is a resonant passage in the best alliterative manner:

> þay boʒen bi bonkkez þer boʒez ar bare,
> þay clomben bi clyffez þer clengez þe colde.
> þe heuen watz vphalt, bot vgly þer-vnder;
> Mist muged on þe mor, malt on þe mountez,

2. J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (London, 1965) p. 171.
3. "The Meaning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", in Robert J. Blanch (ed.), *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays* (Bloomington and London, 1966) p. 171 f.

> Vch hille hade a hatte, a myst-hakel huge.
> Brokez byled and breke bi bonkkez aboute,
> Schyre schaterande on schorez, þer þay doun schowued.
> (2077-83)

These lines evoke an atmosphere rather than describing a recognizable scene. The principal topographical terms—*bonkkez, clyffez, mor, mountez, hille, brokez*—are all common words of which only one, *bonk* "hill-side, slope", derives from Old Norse. There is nothing special about the word, which is common in the place-names of the Danelaw and North Country;[4] indeed, the repeated "bi bonkkez" reveals its ready formulaic usage. What makes this passage exciting is not any unusual diction except for the one poetic compound *myst-hakel* "cloak of mist", but the forceful rhythm, the alliteration sustained on the final words of each line, the striking movement of the verbs which supply the vividness and colour missing in the nouns, and, in the context of the poem, the sharp contrast between the warmth and langour of Hautdesert and the sudden ferocity of the world outside.

But the word *bonk*, however commonplace, deserves a little more attention. It is used often enough in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to indicate its usefulness to the poet as an ingredient of hilly or mountainous landscapes. And it fits as readily into the more "realistic" passages as into the more "romantic" ones. As in Old Norse, so in Middle English, the word can mean both a hill-side and the bank of a river, the shore of a lake, or the sea-coast. Chaucer, for example, uses the word only twice, both times combining both of the main meanings (in *The Franklin's Tale* 849 and in *The Legend of Good Women* 1471) of a high hill-side or cliff overlooking the sea. In the description of Sir Gawain's journey through North Wales, *bonk* (700) refers to the bank of the river Dee and is here associated, in *forlondez* (699), with another Old Norse word, *forlendi* "the land between sea and hills":[5]

> And farez ouer þe fordez by þe forlondez,
> Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
> In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale. . . . .
> (699-701)

Most commentators, including Professor Davis and the editors

4. Cp. A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, Part I, p. 19.
5. Cp. William A. Craigie's 2nd ed. of Cleasby-Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1957) p. 164.

of the *Middle English Dictionary (MED)*, derive *forlondez* from Old English *for(e)* and *lond*, with the meaning "headland, promontory". The word is not common in Middle English. Trevisa uses it to translate Higden's *promunctoriis*, and a word *farlande* occurs in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (880, 984, 1188), where the editor glosses "foreland". In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the Norse meaning (it occurs, for instance, in the *Orkneyinga Saga*) is the more appropriate, however, as the connotation of low-lying land between hills and water applies particularly well to the terrain between mountains and the river and its estuary on the south-western side of the Dee, a terrain traversed by many small streams with appropriate fording-places attested by place-names containing the element *ford*; hence the appropriateness also of the poet's *fordez*.

At this point, in the poet's most "realistic" description of a place in the whole poem, generally identifiable today from its mention of place-names as easily as it must have been by the fourteenth-century audience, the suggestion that the poet used an uncommon topographical word derived from Old Norse is of interest because this is no isolated instance in the poem. Other examples may be found in the description of the hunts, especially the boar hunt, and of the locality of the Green Chapel. The point is not that the *Gawain*-poet was unable to depict scenery without recourse to words of Scandinavian origin--that may or may not be true--but rather that when he describes a landscape apparently familiar to himself and to his audience he tended to use some uncommon topographical words which include a number of Scandinavian origin.

The boar hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* takes place on the second of the three days' hunting and it is in several ways rather different from the other two. It is longer and more circumstantial than the deer hunt and the fox hunt, except for the passage describing the cutting up of the game at the end of the former. It neither moves grandly up hill and down dale as the deer hunt does, nor twists and turns among hedges and thickets as the fox hunt does; rather, it sweeps magnificently along the edge of moorland and around rocky hills and outcrops in keeping with the momentum of the powerful beast it pursues. It also ends differently: in the striking setting of a rocky gorge where the boar is trapped and finally despatched in the water of a stream with "þe bonk at his bak" (1571). Both the other hunts end in the more subdued setting of woodland and thickets.

Among the topographical features mentioned as forming part of the changing terrain of the boar hunt the following

are relevant to the present study. The chase begins "in a ker syde" (1421) repeated shortly after, more pointedly, as "at þe kerre syde" (1431), where *ker(re)* denotes "a bog, a marsh", especially one overgrown with brushwood, the meaning of Old Norse *kjarr* being "copsewood, brushwood". The word is extremely rare in Middle English literature, but common in the toponymy of parts of England settled by Scandinavians. The fifteenth-century *Promptorium Parvulorum* defines *ker* as 'war tres growyn be a water or a fen: *Cardetum*".[6] It is one of four words denoting types of moorland in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the others being *misy, mor*, and *myre*, the last of which is also of Scandinavian origin (O.N. *mýrr*).

The boar hunt continues "bitwene a flosche in þat fryth and a foo cragge" (1430). Perhaps *flosche* should be classed with the moorland words, for it can denote a swamp or marshy place as well as an actual stretch of water ranging from a puddle to a pool. A. H. Smith derives the word from Old Danish *flask*, both *flask* and *flasshe, flosshe* occurring as place-name elements, the latter with possible substitution of Middle English *sh* for Old Norse *sk* or due to the influence of the synonymous French *flache* (A. H. Smith I, 75). The word is rare in fourteenth-century literature, but is used as an effective figure of pools of blood in *The Wars of Alexander* 2049 and in *The Siege of Jerusalem* 571. The word *cragge* "crag, rock" is used by the *Gawain*-poet on this occasion and twice in connection with the locality of the Green Chapel (2183, 2221), in each case in descriptions cast very much in the "realistic" mode. The word is of Celtic origin, but was probably introduced into English, as Smith notes (I, 111), by Norwegian vikings. It is a popular word with some of the alliterative poets: in the *Morte Arthure* the word occurs repeatedly between lines 851 and 1219 to refer to St. Michael's Mount, but is not used elsewhere; in *The Wars of Alexander* the cave-dwelling gymnosophists "crepis into creuesse and craggis on hillis" (4025); a line somewhat reminiscent of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2183.

As the boar hunt proceeds, the poet twice uses the word *knot* to refer to a feature in the landscape: as "a knot" in line 1431, and as "þe knot" in line 1434. The word is of particular interest as a topographical term because it does not appear as such anywhere else in Middle English literature. Its origin is either Old English *cnotta* "a knot", or Old Norse *knQttr* "a ball": more probably the latter in view

6. *The Promptorium Parvulorum: The First English-Latin Dictionary*, ed. A. L. Mayhew (EETS., E.S. 102, London, 1908) col. 247.

of the distribution of the word as a place-name element mainly in the north-west of England. Both A.H. Smith (II, 5) and the *MED* favour Scandinavian origin. In the *Gawain* references we are apparently dealing with yet another example of the poet using a word of Scandinavian origin common enough in the toponymy of his part of England and possibly referring to some landmark known to himself and his audience, but in this case unique as a word in poetry.

Bertilak, we are told in line 1466, following the boar "rode þurȝ ronez ful þyk", not a topographical landmark this time, although *ronez* is another interesting word of Norse origin. The word denotes "a thicket" and derives from Old Norse *runnr* "a bush, grove"; it survives in Scotland and in several northern English dialects, according to the *English Dialect Dictionary*, with the same related meanings, "a tangle of brushwood, thorns, etc., a thick growth of weeds". The word occurs in some other alliterative poems, for example *Morte Arthure* 923, *The Awntyrs off Arthure* 161, and *The Pistill of Susan* 72, alliterating with *rosers* or *rose*, but does not appear to be very common in place-names. The word may be the same as the Middle High German *rone* "tree trunk", found, for example, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* V, 224, 19f.:

Mit gewalt den zoum daz ros
Truog über ronen und durchez mos.

The final confrontation of the boar hunt, between hunter and prey, takes place in a stream, a definite stream, it seems, for the poet refers to it as "þe boerne":

Til at þe last he [the boar] watz so mat he myȝt no more renne,
Bot in þe hast þat he myȝt he to a hole wynnez
Of a rasse bi a rokk þer rennez þe boerne.
He gete þe bonk at his bak, bigynez to scrape.
(1568-71)

The topography of this episode has puzzled editors and critics alike. Its interpretation hinges on the meaning of "a hole . . ./ Of a rasse", which presumably cannot refer to an opening in a "ledge of rock", Professor Davis's tentative suggestion,[7] as the beast might have found refuge inside it. We can derive *rasse* from Old French *ras* "lisière d'un champ, d'un bois", given the tempting hint from *Cleanness*

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7. In the glossary of his edition, s.v. *rasse*; he adds a question mark.

446, "On a rasse of a rok, hit [the Ark] rest at þe laste", where *rasse* probably means "edge" or "ledge". But we should, I suggest, derive the *Gawain*-poet's word from Old Norse *rás* "a water-course, channel", a word that survives in "mill-race". In that case, what the poem says is that the boar reaches a "hole" of a water-course, or river bed, alongside a rock where the stream runs. The "hole" is perhaps best explained as an opening or widening of the valley, making a shallow basin of water enclosed by rock, with narrow defiles at each end. Once in such a "hole", the beast's escape at each end is easily prevented. There is such a feature in the valley of the river Dane on the border between Cheshire and North Staffordshire called Pinchers Hole, perhaps because "pinching", was "used of hounds pressing upon and seizing their game",[8] and this particular place lies at the heart of good medieval hunting country. Such a "hole", possibly this same Pinchers Hole, the *Gawain*-poet may have had in mind when he selected yet another uncommon topographical word, *rasse*, which I take to be of Scandinavian origin, in this final episode of the boar hunt.

There can be little doubt that much of the terrain of the boar hunt must have been easily visualized by the contemporary audience of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, not least because the poet chose several crucial words deliberately from topographical nomenclature presumably familiar in his part of England, among which, as we have seen, quite a few were of Scandinavian origin, rather than from a more obvious literary vocabulary.

The locality of the Green Chapel is reached along the "romantic" ascent discussed earlier. Once on top of the hill, Sir Gawain's guide offers brief but clear directions (2144-7) which the knight follows (2160 ff.) and which bring him face to face with the puzzle of the Green Chapel itself. In these passages too words of Scandinavian origin play their part in describing topographical features. The ubiquitous *bonk* appears half a dozen times in the last fitt, both to reinforce the general impression of high hills, steep banks, and deep valleys, and to point to specific places:

Ridez þurȝ þe roȝe bonk ryȝt to þe dale.
(2162)

A balȝ berȝ bi a bonke þe brymme bysyde.
(2172)

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8. Thus Robert Nares in his *Glossary* (London, 1888), alongside an apt quotation from Chapman's *Odyssey*.

'Abyde', quoþ on on þe bonke abouen ouer his hede.
(2217)

Sir Gawain is directed to descend "doun þis ilk rake" (2144) and duly "gederez þe rake" (2160), a word usually derived from Old Norse *rák* "a streak, stripe", to give Middle English *rake* "a path", but one which may as easily derive from Old English *racu* "a hollow, a stream, a river-bed", or Old English *hraca* "throat", used in the sense of "pass" in some place-names. Contextually, the sense of stream or river-bed is most appropriate, for once arrived at the bottom of the valley Sir Gawain notices a con-spicuous feature ("a balȝ berȝ") alongside *the* stream "þe brymme bysyde" (2172), not previously mentioned unless it be as the *rake*. The reference to the stream or more prob-ably to a second, confluent stream, continues in the next two lines:

Bi a forȝ of a flode þat ferked þare;
þe borne blubred þerinne as hit boyled hade.
(2173-4)

The word *forȝ* is taken by Professor Davis as derived from Old English *furh* "furrow", in the sense of water-course, whereas earlier editors and the *MED* regard it as a Middle English form of Old Norse *fors* "waterfall", the first such occurrence in English. In the context, a waterfall is not ruled out at the bottom of the valley, *pace* Professor Davis,[9] because the poet's wording suggests a second stream tumbling down "bi a bonke": alongside "þe brymme" of line 2172 is "a forȝ of a flode". Moreover, the verbs *blubred* and *boyled* are more suited to the action of cascad-ing water than of water flowing even in rapids in a *furh*. It is also worth noting that the latter word appears in toponymy mainly in the southern counties of England and in the south midlands, whereas the Scandinavian word appears, as one would expect, in the place-names of the northern half of the country. It looks, on this evidence, as if the poet had once again chosen an unusual word of Scandinavian origin to describe yet another interesting topographical feature forming part of his "realistic" geography.

When Sir Gawain first reaches the "boþem of þe brem valay" (2145) he sees no Green Chapel, only "hyȝe bonkkez and brent vpon boþe halue" (2165), and strange, twisted, gnarled rocks described as *scowtes* in a line rich in Norse words: "þe skwez of þe scowtes skayned hym þoȝt" (2167). The word *scowtes* derives from Old Norse *skúti* "a cave formed by jutting rocks", and at the beginning of the twentieth century was apparently still current in the Derbyshire dialect.[10] It survives in the Derbyshire Kinder Scout, the highest peak in the Peak District, and in the Lancashire Scout Moor. I have found no other occurrence in the Middle English alliterative poems, but the corresponding verb "to project", from Old Norse *skúta* "to jut out, so as to form a shade or cave, of rocks or the like", occurs in a vigorous line in *The Wars of Alexander* 4865, "Scutis to þe scharpe schew sckerres a hundreth". Here *sckerres* "scars, scaurs, rocks, rocky cliffs" represents, incidentally, another Scan-dinavian word, *sker*, found in north-western place-names but rare in the literature of the fourteenth century.

When the Green Knight eventually appears on the scene, he comes "whyrlande out of a wro" (2222), "whirling" out of some secret spot, *wro* "nook" being the Old Norse *vrá, rá* "a corner, a nook", a word found in northern and north-western place-names of England with similar meanings of a nook or corner of land. The word occurs in *The Wars of Alexander* 1585, 4190, and in the transferred sense of "passage" in *Pearl* 866: "In Appocalyppece is wryten in wro". In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the word, in apposition to the more commonplace *hole*, contributes something of additional mystery to the whole scene and to the Green Knight's hidden activity. Not satisfied with the plain narrative statement that, once the whetting is finished, the Green Knight "keuerez bi a cragge, and comez of a hole" (2221), the poet adds the words "whyrlande out of a wro" to suggest the knight's sudden flamboyant emergence into the open from the mystery that previously enshrouded him. The scene is being set for disclosure and denouement.

The words so far discussed in this chapter do not ex-haust the list of Scandinavian topographical words in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The word *felle* "fell, hill, precipitous rock" occurs in line 723 in a strongly evoca-tive, "romantic" passage enumerating Sir Gawain's adventures on the way from Camelot to Hautdesert. The word occurs in other alliterative poems, several times in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, in *Morte Arthure*, and *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, and is common as a place-name element in the mountain-ous parts of the Pennines and the Lake District (A.H. Smith,

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9. Professor Davis (p. 125) is of course correct about the use of ȝ for voiceless -s in the poem, but the evidence does not strike me as conclusive.

10. According to E. M. Wright "Notes on *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight*", *Englische Studien* 36 (1906) 219. Cp. also the *English Dialect Dictionary*, s.v. *scout* sb. 1.

I, 174). It usually denotes a single mountain in these places, corresponding to the Old Norse *fell* as used in Iceland, whereas *fjall* (which also produced Middle English *fell, felle*) was used in Old Norse of a range of mountains or mountainous country generally as well as of single mountains.

By contrast, the word *flat* (507) (Old Norse *flatr*, adjective; *flǫt*, noun), which denotes a piece of flat, level ground, a plain, which is common in place-names of the northern counties, is rare in Middle English literature. It occurs several times in *The Destruction of Troy*, but does not appear to have been used before its appearance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Its use in the poet's line "Fallen vpon fayre flat, flowrez þere schewen" (507), seems to be prompted by alliteration, much as in the case of a similar, equally rare, though etymologically distinct, word in *Pearl* 57: "I felle vpon þat floury flaȝt". The eclectic nature of the alliterative poet's diction is well illustrated by such examples.

Two other words deserve mention; both occur in the context of the fox hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The terrain of this hunt, it will be recalled, differs markedly from that of the boar hunt. Where the latter moves in a great surge through rocky valleys and around prominent hills called by unusual names, the fox hunt winds its way through a maze of thickets and brushwood and undergrowth, leaping and turning in pursuit of the twisting and dodging beast. The predominant words here are *greue* "thicket, grove", *heggez* "hedges", *dich, wode*, and the more unusual *strothe* and *spenne*. Of these two, *strothe* is certainly another Scandinavian word, *storð* "a young wood, plantation", perhaps influenced in meaning as in form by Old English *strōd* "marshy land covered with bushes or trees". The fox, we are told,

Stelez out ful stilly bi a strothe rande,
Went haf wylt of þe wode with wylez fro þe houndes.
(1710-11)

It makes good sense to take "a strothe rande" to refer to the edge (*rande*) of a wood or plantation, possibly on marshy ground, and to assume that "þe wode" refers to the same place. This is certainly in keeping with the character of the terrain, and the same sense, applied more generally perhaps, can be attached to the compound *stroþe-men* in *Pearl* 115: "As stremande sterneȝ, quen stroþe-men slepe". Perhaps simply country-folk or, recalling Hardy, woodlanders, might be an appropriate rendering here.

The word *spenne* occurs three times in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, once as an obvious tag in the "bob" of a bob and wheel:

And cum to þat merk at mydmorn, to make quat yow likez in spenne,

(1073-4)

and twice in the context of the fox hunt: "At þe last bi a littel dich he lepez ouer a spenne" (1709) and "As he sprent ouer a spenne to spye þe schrewe" (1896). Most probably, all three words are the same, despite the attempt of Tolkien and Gordon in their first edition of the poem to distinguish two words. Professor Davis, in the second edition, regards all three as one word, derived from Old Norse *spenni* "a locket, a clasp", a derivative of the verb *spenna* "to span, clasp". Unfortunately, neither the literary occurrences (the word also occurs in *The Wars of Alexander* 4162 "on þe spene"), nor the place-name evidence, as A. H. Smith admits,[11] are decisive. What is clear is the formulaic character of "in spenne", like the similarly positioned "in stedde" of line 439. Although the tag, in line 1074, refers to the locality of the Green Chapel, it cannot mean more than simply "there" or "in that place" as Davis and Smith have noted. The word does not carry any more specific meaning in *The Wars of Alexander* where a storm has blown down Alexander's tents "on þe spene", in that place. This leaves the two occurrences of the word in the fox hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which could possibly be explained as referring to fences, from the meaning "piece of land enclosed by a fence", ultimately derived from the Scandinavian noun or verb.

This explanation accords so well with the general argument of the present chapter, that it is hard to reject it. But the topography of the fox hunt favours derivation of *spenne* from Old French *espine* "thorn", the Latin *spīna* "thorn", *spīnus* "blackthorn", with some of the connotations of the French word carried into Middle English: "thorn bush, thorn hedge, thorn thicket". There is a similar lowering of original *i* to *e* in other words in the poem. The modern English *spinney*, from Old French *espinei*, Latin *spīnētum* "a hedge or thicket of thorns", is a close relative, but does not appear to be common in place-names until the fifteenth century and the *OED* gives the year of its first literary occurrence in its modern meaning of wood or copse as 1597.

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11. Part II, p. 137. Cp. also Smith's note in *The Place-Names of the East Riding of Yorkshire and York* (English Place-Name Society, vol. XIV, Cambridge, 1937) pp. 330-2.

Hence the probable meaning of *spenne* in lines 1709 and 1896 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, derived from the French source, is a hedge or thicket of thorns, something like what Addison described in the *Spectator* of 4 May 1711 as "this huge Thicket of Thorns and Brakes . . . designed as a kind of Fence". A hedge or even a thicket of thorns was not sufficient obstacle to prevent hunter or prey from leaping across it, and the connotations of thorns and tangled undergrowth are wholly appropriate to the fox hunt as well as to Sir Gawain's own entanglement in the bedroom episode of the third day.

The Norse words mentioned in this essay are not in themselves unusual words, it is what happens to them in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that makes them worthy of note. Some of them, like the poet's *felle* or *flat* or *myre*, fit readily into the alliterative patterns and into the more "romantic" descriptions of background in which they figure. Were the words and the descriptions in the poem all of this kind, there would have been no occasion for this particular essay in honour of a genial and learned scholar, himself as thoroughly familiar with the fells of Iceland as with the flats of Victoria. It is that other group of words, *forlondez, forz, kerre, knot, scowtes, strothe*, and the rest, that stands out, along with the *Gawain*-poet's other unusual topographical words derived from different sources, as contributing something unique to the art of the poem. What all these words contribute is a topographical distinctiveness within the "realistic geography" of the poem that points beyond the poet's eclecticism of diction to the names of real places, some of which I have pointed out elsewhere. Most of the words discussed are rare in fourteenth-century literature, one or two of them appear to be unique to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; but most of them appear in the toponymy of the *Gawain*-poet's north-west midland counties. He did not have to look far for appropriate terms to alert his audience to the topicality of his descriptions, for his countryside was rich in names imprinted by centuries of English and Scandinavian settlement. Whether the poet's audience recognized particular places in the landscapes of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* we can only surmise; what is beyond question, however, is the art with which this poet has drawn northern landscape features into his romance, ranging all the way from the hills of the Peak District to the mountains of Iceland.

6. THE TOPOGRAPHICAL VOCABULARY 1:

HILLS AND VALLEYS IN THE 'GAWAIN' COUNTRY

"The *Gawain* country" is a convenient term to describe two types of landscape, whose connection this chapter seeks to explore: on the one hand the fictional settings of the Middle English alliterative poems, and on the other hand the real landscapes of the west and north-west midlands and of northern England where most of these poems originated. To distinguish between the two types, I refer to the latter as the "real" *Gawain* country, whenever the distinction is of importance to my argument.

The fictional landscapes provide settings in a variety of poems, of which the following are most frequently cited in this chapter: the Arthurian romances *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn*, and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*; the "verse novel", as it has been called, *William of Palerne*; the "classical chronicles" *The 'Gest Hystoriale' of the Destruction of Troy, The Siege of Jerusalem*, and *The Wars of Alexander*; the dream visions *The Parlement of the Thre Ages, Piers Plowman*, and *Pearl*; the verse homilies *Patience* and *Cleanness*; and the poems dealing with contemporary social questions *Winner and Waster* and *Mum and the Sothsegger*.

Yet for all their fictitiousness, the landscapes of these poems have some noteworthy lexical parallels with the toponymy of north-west midland and northern England, and some of them bear the imprint of genuine English landscapes. Thus the names of identifiable English places occur in *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn*, in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Langland points unmistakably to the Malvern hills. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* such accurate localization of at least one of the episodes in the poem has led a number

of critics to believe that the poet is speaking of a region well-known to him and was drawing upon real and familiar landscapes and landmarks in describing not only the crossing of the Dee but other scenes as well. This region lies at the heart of what I call the real *Gawain* country, in that part of the north-west midlands where Cheshire, Staffordshire, and Derbyshire meet.

In this chapter I shall confine myself to a discussion of terms denoting hills and valleys in alliterative poetry mainly of the fourteenth century in order to clarify the meanings and connotations of some of the words used; to bring out stylistic differences between various alliterative poets; to explore parallels between such terms and their occurrence in place-names; and thus possibly to assign some words, and perhaps the poems in which they occur, to more specific regions.

Hills and valleys are permanent features of a landscape, at least within the relatively short time-span that separates the fourteenth century from the twentieth; they are thus likely to be very much the same as they were at the time when the alliterative poems were composed, and because of this permanence it may prove possible to establish occasional links between a poet's vocabulary and actual place-names. Moreover, the fictional *Gawain* country is particularly distinguished by its hilly character: there is hardly an alliterative poem in which at least some of the action does not take place in hilly or mountainous terrain appropriately described.

Of course, much topographical description in the alliterative poems is of the vaguest, and the formulae of the type "by hylle ne be vale" (*Gaw* 2271) or "ouer dales and downes" (*Wm Pal* 2715) are very common. The formula represents one extreme of topographical description; as a rule, what it refers to can be neither sharply visualized nor identified as an actual locale. To accuse the hero, as the Green Knight does in line 2271 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, of not being the genuine Gawain who was never afraid of any army by hill nor by vale, is clearly not intended to evoke a picture of Sir Gawain actually charging the enemy up specific hills or down particular valleys. Yet at the other extreme of topographical description this is precisely what we are invited to do, whether it be to follow Sir Gawain across several fords and low-lying reaches to the bank of the Dee and thence to the other side, or whether it be to look to the left with Sir Gawain after reaching the bottom of the valley near the Green Chapel towards those rough rugged crags with gnarled stones which form such a distinctive and unexpected landmark in that neighbourhood.

In between these extremes are descriptions of places which allow a fairly precise image within the context, like the subdued opening setting in the garden of *Pearl* or the quarry where the fugitives hide in *William of Palerne*, but which no map of the north-west midlands will help us to pinpoint.

The topographical formula, frequently alliterating, plays variations on the theme "up hill and down dale" in all those many narratives where there is frequent movement of individuals or whole armies. Yet even material so unpromising can reveal a few stylistic idiosyncrasies. The poet of *William of Palerne*, for example, whose story entails a considerable amount of cross-country running, strongly favours a vague topographical impressionism conveyed by such phrases as "ouer dales and downes", "ouer dales and helles", "ouer mountaynes and mires and oþer wicked weiȝes", "ouer mures and muntaynes and many faire pleynes". By contrast, the poet of *The Awntyrs off Arthure* prefers formulae of a more descriptive or emotive type, like "in bonkes so bare", "in cliffes so colde", "in cleues so clene", not confined to hills and valleys, or else he ends his lines with prepositional phrases like "in þe dymme skuwes"; yet he too uses the familiar collocation of two nouns, as in "in frithes and felles".[1] The *Gawain*-poet has his share of topographical clichés, but he is more selective than his fellow-poets in the words he uses in formulae and those which he reserves for more specific descriptions. Some words denoting hills and valleys are used for all purposes, like *bonke, clyffe, hille*; one or two, like *doune* or *mount*, occur in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* only in formulae, although their use may be more specific in the other poems ascribed to the *Gawain*-poet; yet others again, like *cragge, scowte, valay*, are used by this poet only in specific topographical contexts.

bonke, clyffe, hille

Among words denoting hills in alliterative poetry the most common are *bonke, clyffe*, and *hille*. Of these only *bonke* belongs more particularly to the real *Gawain* country: as a topographical term it derives from Scandinavian, like

1. *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn*, ed. R. Hanna III (Manchester, 1974). The Douce manuscript which forms the base text of this edition represents the dialect of the region where Derbyshire, Staffordshire and East Cheshire meet (p. 149). Practically all the topographical terms occur in the first part (A) of this poem.

several other hill-words, and is common in place-names and dialects in the Danelaw and north country.[2] It is widely used in the alliterative poems in the sense of "river bank or sea shore"; it is common as a tag, as in "bi bonk" (*Gaw* 511); but it can also form part of a closely envisaged scene, as in Sir Gawain's crossing of the Dee (700) or in the final moments of the boar hunt in the same poem when the doomed beast turns his back on "þe bonk" (1571), a definite feature in a clearly realized terrain.

The word *clyffe* has a similar range of meanings and uses. Its initial sound favours strongly resonant alliteration with words like *clamberande* or *clatered* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or with the visually and symbolically appropriate *crystal* in *Pearl* 74, 159, *The Siege of Jerusalem* 102, or *The Wars of Alexander* 4825. The association of the word with "climbing" is inevitable, both literally and, occasionally and effectively, in figurative use:

> Wen a mon is at myght, and most of astate,
> Clommbyn all the Clif to þe clene top.
> (*Destr Troy* 13676-7)

The same poet also introduces what look like topographical subtleties into the basic meaning of *clyffe* by using different prepositions: "comyn *into* þe cliffe", "clymbe *at* a clyffe", "kild *on* þe cliffe".

Like *bonke* and *clyffe*, *hille* is a common word. It is often conjoined with the adjective *high*—an alliterative convenience—and its uses range from the simple tag "on hille" to specific locations like "þat hyȝe hil" above the Green Chapel where Sir Gawain hears the tumult heralding the Green Knight's approach (*Gaw* 2199), or "þe hyl of Syon" in *Pearl* 789.

mount, mountayne, doune

The *hyl* of *Pearl* 789 is varied to "þe mount of Syon" in line 868, a word which is not common in alliterative poems except in *Morte Arthure* whose poet evinces some fondness for *mountes*, especially in vague phrases at the end of lines where alliteration does not apply: "ouere the mounttes", "to the mowntes", "entre the mountes".[3]

Nor is *mountayne* a common word except, understandably, in the fifteenth-century Scottish alliterative poems. Chaucer uses *mount* only in verse, whereas *mountain* occurs ten times in his prose but only five times in his verse.[4] In *The House of Fame* he distinguishes, from his aerial vantage point, between hills and mountains, a contrast also to be found in the juxtaposition of "mounteyns, and . . . mayn hylles" in *The Destruction of Troy* 5477. In the latter poem there are several instances in which mountains are associated with nightfall, possibly merely an alliterative accident (*merkenes*), possibly a more deliberate evocation of the awesome grandeur of mountains at night. The magnitude of mountains is also made explicit by the *Gawain*-poet's only use of the word:

> þe moste mountayneȝ on mor þenne were no more dryȝe.
> (*Cleanness* 385)

Place-names containing *mount* or *mountayne* are mostly of French origin and are not confined to those parts of England where alliterative poetry flourished.

The word *doune*, "a down or hill", also has wide distribution in English place-names, and occurs more frequently in non-alliterative poems than in alliterative ones, despite the obviously useful pairing of *dales* with *dounes*. Rather surprisingly, Kane and Donaldson prefer "[dounes] and hulles" in *Piers Plowman* B IX, 142, where some dozen manuscripts read *dales*, a word rather more typical of Langland than *dounes* and more likely to be paired with *hilles*, as in *William of Palerne* 2432.[5]

lawe, felle, cragge

Rather more characteristic of the *Gawain* country are the words *lawe, felle* and *cragge*. In Old English the word *hlāw* generally refers to an artificial mount, a burial mound or tumulus, and the majority of Old English place-names combining this element with a personal name refer to burial mounds dating from the heathen period (AHS I, 249). But as A. H. Smith points out, the simple meaning "hill" or "a conical hill resembling a tumulus" is also found in Old English "and local topography establishes this meaning as a

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2. See A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, Part I, p. 19, hereafter abbreviated in the text as AHS.
3. *Morte Arthure*, ed. J. Finlayson (London, 1967). Passages not included in Finlayson's shortened version are quoted from the edition by E. Brock (EETS, OS 8, London, 1865).

4. For Chaucer references see the *Concordance* of J. S. P. Tatlock and A.G. Kennedy (Washington, D.C., 1927).
5. *Piers Plowman, The B Version*, ed. G. Kane and E. T. Donaldson (London, 1975). Pearsall's edition of the C-text (X, 228) reads 'by dales and by hulles'.

common one in place-names and dialects in certain parts of the country", notably in Durham and Northumberland where it survives in the form *law*, and in the north-west midlands were it survives as *low*. The *English Dialect Dictionary* cites under *law*, sb. 2, a late eighteenth-century reference to the North Staffordshire moorlands as the "Low Country" and in the heart of the real *Gawain* country the element is very common in names denoting hills and places, like Shuttlingsloe in north-east Cheshire and Warslow in the North Staffordshire moorlands, and in personal names like Joh. de la Stonilowe, recorded in Staffordshire at the beginning of the fourteenth century.[6] In alliterative poetry *lawe* usually means simply "hill", without any burial associations, as in its three occurrences in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (one referring to the situation of the castle, two to the locale of the Green Chapel), or in *Cleanness* 992 where the city of Zoar is spared because of its situation "on a lawe", also called "a rounde hil" in line 927. Contextual meanings are occasionally found for *lawe*, as in *The Wars of Alexander* 5485 where to be enclosed "in a straite lawe" suggests either a pass between hills or a narrow hill top where the kings could be surrounded. A similar usage occurs in the words "loken by a lawe the lengthe of a myle" in *Winner and Waster* 49 which may refer to a circular earthwork if *loken* is rendered as "enclosed".

The word *felle* is even more restricted in both literary and topographical usage. The *Gawain*-poet uses it only once, in the reference to giants pursuing Sir Gawain from "þe heȝe felle" (*Gaw* 723) as he braves the hazards of the journey from the Dee to Bertilak's castle. Here, as well as in a couple of alliterating occurrences in *Morte Arthure* (2489, 2502), the word could conceivably connote the sense of "moorland" recorded by both the *Middle English Dictionary* and the *English Dialect Dictionary*. In *The Wars of Alexander* the word occurs once in the Dublin MS (1211) where the Ashmole MS reads *hillis*, although the latter does read *fellis* in 4046, where the meaning "an upland pasture", also recorded by the *Middle English Dictionary*, fits the context particularly well. There are some instances of the formula "in frithes and felles", and variants thereof, in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and in several of the Scottish alliterative poems. In both place-names and personal names the word belongs mainly to the mountainous regions of the northern

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6. G. Kristensson, *Studies on Middle English Topographical Terms* (Lund, 1970) p. 88; hereafter cited in the text as Kristensson. Cp. also M. T. Löfvenberg, *Studies on Middle English Local Surnames* (Lund, 1942), cited as Löfvenberg.

Pennines, northwards from Lancashire, and the Lake District.

Whereas *felle* is of Scandinavian origin representing both Old Norse *fell* "a single mountain" and *fjall* "mountains, mountainous country", *cragge* is of Celtic origin and was probably introduced into north-west England by Norwegian vikings (AHS I, p. 111). In place-names it occurs chiefly in the north-west. The basic meaning is "a precipitous rock, cliff, or promontory" and on such *crageȝ* the Ark settles in *Cleanness* 449; but crags were often associated with secret lairs or hiding places both in topography and in alliterative poetry, and this sense probably derives from the geological fact that crags often project or lean almost horizontally from their hillsides. There is a Wolfhole Crag in Lancashire, and Miss M. Dominica Legge has kindly drawn my attention to the similarly named, sharply jutting Wolf Crags in the Pentland Hills near Edinburgh. In the parish of Wildboarclough at the heart of the real *Gawain* country the word "crag" occurs in several names, and only a short walk to the south is an example of an almost horizontally projecting crag, the Hanging Stone near Swythamley Park in the North Staffordshire moorlands, such as could aptly be described in the *Gawain*-poet's words as "a foo cragge" (*Gaw* 1430). Both the primary meaning of "a precipitous rock" and the connotations of concealment in some hidden retreat are appropriately combined in the repeated references to St. Michael's Mount, the lair of the giant slain by Arthur, as a *cragge* in *Morte Arthure*, a word not applied to any other place in that poem. In *William of Palerne* the werewolf "kouchid him vnder a kragge" (2240), and then guided his charges "vnder" the same crag, where they eventually "vnder þe castel in a crag cauȝt here rest" (2867). Similarly, the wounded hart in *The Parlement of The Thre Ages* "crepyde into a krage and crouschede to þe erthe" (64), and the same connotations are present in the description of pearls growing in the sea concealed "in graynes and in cragis" in *The Wars of Alexander* 3375, and in line 4025 of the same poem,

Bot crepis in-to creuesse and craggis on hillis,

which associates the same words, and their connotations, as the *Gawain*-poet's

Or a creuisse of an olde cragge, he couþe hit noȝt deme with spelle.

(*Gaw* 2183-4)

Such consistent usage suggests that *cragge* is one of those

topographical terms whose connotations the alliterative poets exploited with some care.

berȝ

Very rare in alliterative poetry is *berȝ*, which Langland uses to describe his "Bergh, bere-no-fals-witnesse" in *Piers Plowman* B V 580, where it appears to have puzzled some of the scribes into writing variously *burgh, beech, brygge, et al.* The word occurs twice within half a dozen lines in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

A balȝ berȝ bi a bonke þe brymme bysyde;   (2172)

þenne he boȝez to þe berȝe, aboute hit he walkez. (2178)

The basic meaning of the word is "hill, mound" both in Old English and in Old Norse, and it is in this sense that it mostly occurs in place-names throughout the country. Where archaeological evidence suggests an old tumulus the word can denote an artificial or burial mound in place-names, but such cases are less common. In Derbyshire, for example, one of the four certain instances of the Old English element *beorg* is the name of a burial mound.[7] The *Gawain*-poet's *berȝ* is not likely to be a "smooth-surfaced barrow on a slope", as A. C. Cawley and Brian Stone, for example, render these words, but more simply "a rounded hill", as A.H. Smith suggests on the evidence of toponymy: "In place-names the topographical reference is usually to 'a rounded hill', as in M.E. *a balȝe berȝ*" (AHS I, p. 18). Like *lawe* in the same context *berȝ* should be freed of any burial connotations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the poet's systematic topography at this point rules out a smooth-surfaced, thrice-holed funereal barrow halfway up the hillside.

knarre, knot

Several of the more distinctive hill and valley words found in the alliterative poems are still familiar to living dialect speakers in those parts of the north-west midlands where dialectal and graphemic evidence places the composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and some of the other alliterative poems. One seventy-year-old Cheshire craftsman, son of a stone cutter, who like his father and grandfather has lived all his life at the foot of Alderley

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7. K. Cameron. *The Place-Names of Derbyshire* (English Place-Name Society vol. XXVII-XXIX, Cambridge, 1959) III, p. 701.

Edge in the north-east corner of the county, responded readily to *bonke, clyffe, cragge, felle, lawe*, and several other hill-words, but he did not know *berȝ*.[8] Nor did he know two other unusual words, *knarre* and *knot*, both of which are conjoined alliteratively and topographically in the description of the boar hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The only literary occurrence of *knarre* outside this poem appears to be its nonce use as a deliberate northernism in line 1001 of the thirteenth-century poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*, where "knarres and cludes" are singled out along with snow and hail as characteristic of the "grislich", wild, and inhospitable north country.[9] The etymology of *knarre* is somewhat obscure. There are Dutch and Low German cognates meaning "stump, knob" suggesting an Old English *cnearr*, which survives in northern and some midland dialects, according to the *English Dialect Dictionary*, as *gnar(r)* meaning "a hard knot in wood, or knob". Its contextual meaning of "rugged or twisted rock" is clear from the resonant line describing those queer gnarled rock formations in the vicinity of the Green Chapel:

And ruȝe knokled knarrez with knorned stonez.
                                        (*Gaw* 2166)

Elsewhere in the poem we are told that wild men of the woods lived in "þe knarrez" (721), appropriately "grislich" dwellings for a characteristic conflation in this poem of the wild, half-human forest dwellers of romance with the marauders and freebooters who so notoriously infested Cheshire in the later fourteenth century.

The third occurrence of *knarre* links it with the equally rare word *knot* which in alliterative poetry only the *Gawain*-poet uses in a topographical sense. He does so three times, twice within four lines and with reference to the same feature in the description of the boar hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where, in line 1434, the hunters are said to "vmbekesten þe knarre and þe knot boþe", and once in *Pearl* 788, where it is usually rendered "throng". But there

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8. I am grateful to Mr Alan Garner for recording these responses, more especially as *The Survey of English Dialects*, ed. H. Orton and E. Dieth (Leeds, 1962 *et seq.*), does not include hill and valley words, except for the question IV, 1, 10: "If the land is not level, what do you call a part that goes up gently?", to which the responses were *slope* and *bonk* in north-east Cheshire and north Staffordshire, and *slope* in north-west Derbyshire.
9. Ed. E. G. Stanley (London, 1960).

is less warrant for "throng" than for the topographical sense "rocky hill, hillock, rocky eminence" found in north-west midland and north-western place-names and in this sense probably derived ultimately from Old Norse *knǫttr* "a ball". In *Pearl* the reference is to St. John's vision of the Lamb and his 144,000 spotless followers "supra montem Sion" (*Revelation* XIV, 1). He sees them, according to the poet,

> al in a knot,
> On þe hyl of Syon, þat semly clot;
> þe apostel hem segh in gostly drem
> Arayed to þe weddyng in þat hyl-coppe,
> þe nwe cyté o Jerusalem.
>
> (*Pearl* 788-92)

As we know from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and from topography, *knot* means much the same thing as the other hill-words in this passage. The repetition of the same idea in different words is characteristic of *Pearl*, partly due no doubt to the intricate verse patterns employed, and the use of *in* with *knot* is exactly paralleled by *in* with *hyl-coppe*. Although the Lamb's numerous followers unquestionably constitute a throng, there is no specific reference to a throng in *Revelation*; on the other hand, the topographical meaning is sufficiently attested and contextually appropriate for us to regard *knot* in *Pearl* as the same word which occurs in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In the latter poem it is certainly one of the most esoteric of topographical terms and may well have been taken from the poet's own landscape. There is a rocky plateau called Knotbury in the north Staffordshire moorlands which, like Knott End in Lancashire or the personal name Emma del Knot, recorded in Cumberland in the fourteenth century (Kristensson, p. 33), contain the same element. If, moreover, we note the occurrence of a place called the Knar or Knar (Farm) at the edge of Cutthorn hill facing Knotbury across the river Dane, the *Gawain*-poet's linking of the two words becomes even more interesting. The name Knar is not recorded before the nineteenth century, but the history of the farm in the possession of the Slack family (now settled in Australia) goes back several generations further. The name Knotbury was sufficiently established to figure in William Yates's map of Staffordshire of 1775 along with other place-names for which earlier records exist.[10] It must be stressed that documen-

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10. The historical value of Yates's map is stressed by S.A.H. Burne, 'Early Staffordshire Maps', *North Staffordshire Field Club Transactions* 54 (1919-20) 81-2.

tation for many names in the moorlands is often scanty, as the published volumes of the English Place-Name Society make evident, and as Dr J. P. Oakden, who has long worked on Staffordshire place-names, has informed me regarding that county. Thus, even as late as the mid-nineteenth century Tithe Awards only twelve of the thirty-one parishes in North Totmonslow hundred, the northernmost part of Staffordshire, had Awards.

clude, hyl-coppe, clot

The word *clude*, which the poet of *The Owl and the Nightingale* links, as we saw, with *knarre*, derives from Old English *clūd* "rock, rocky hill", and occurs in south-western place-names and personal names (cp. Löfvenberg, p. 39) as well as in west midland place-names like the Staffordshire Hen Cloud and the Five Clouds of the Roaches near Leek or the Derbyshire Foxcloud in Wirksworth hundred. In the alliterative poems it is very difficult to identify any unequivocal instances of *clude* meaning "rocky hill" rather than "cloud", although there are one or two doubtful cases.

The word *coppe*, as in *hyl-coppe* (*Pearl* 791), from Old English *copp*, "peak, summit", occurs in place-names mainly in the midlands and north country and is found in dialects as far south as Staffordshire and Derbyshire. A well-known example is the conspicuous hill on the Cheshire-Staffordshire border at the edge of the moorlands, Mow Cop, crowned by a mock ruin, which saw the birth of primitive methodism. The Derbyshire Cop Low combines the elements *coppe* and *law*. The word is rare in the alliterative poems but was used by Chaucer a couple of times. It occurs twice in *The Wars of Alexander* and once in *Mum and the Sothsegger* 883, and in all three instances the meaning of "hill top" is clear and the word is made to alliterate.

Although there is little evidence for the topographical meaning "hill" for *clot* (*Pearl* 789), which in Old English meant "clod, clay", there are three occurrences, two from the fourteenth century, of the interesting designation Thorp(e) in the Clottes for the Derbyshire village of Thorpe in Wirksworth hundred, a mile from the Staffordshire border. This is presumably a reference to the several hills surrounding the village, among which the most conspicuous is Thorpe Cloud guarding the entrance to the most picturesque stretch of Dovedale. Once again the *Gawain*-poet appears to be using a rare topographical term from his own countryside.

egge, torre

A common element in the place-names of the southern

Pennine moorlands to describe hill tops as well as the often precipitous slopes is *egge*. Names like Axe Edge, Turn Edge, Wolf Edge occur within a few miles of each other in the vicinity of Knotbury, and the personal name Joh. del Stonyegge, recorded in Staffordshire in 1332 (Kristensson, p. 88), contains the same element. The poet of *The Wars of Alexander* (4876) uses *egge* as a synonym for *clyffe*. In *Cleanness* 383 "þe bonkeʒ eggeʒ" describes the water level reached by the Flood, while in the same poem "þe hyʒest of þe eggeʒ" (451) are the first signs of solid ground to be revealed as the waters begin to recede. The literal meaning is not far to seek in these instances. In place-names and personal names the word occurs also in other parts of England, mainly in western counties. The Derbyshire place-name Heage in Appletree hundred, recorded as Hehegge in 1379, closely resembles the *Gawain*-poet's phrase in *Cleanness* 451.

Another hill-word of the real *Gawain* country that finds its way into alliterative poetry is *torre*. It denotes "a rocky outcrop or rocky peak", and is used thus, either literally or figuratively, in several alliterative poems. To two of the poets *torres* aptly conveys the towering heights of waves in a storm (*Siege Jer* 65, *Destr Troy* 1983), while the *Gawain*-poet associates the word in both *Pearl* and *Cleanness* with masses of clouds in a thunderstorm:

And as þunder þroweʒ in torreʒ blo.
(*Pearl* 875)
Clowdeʒ clustered bytwene, kesten vp torres,
þat þe þik þunder-þrast þirled hem ofte.
(*Cleanness* 951-2)

The poet of *The Wars of Alexander*, who shares some of the *Gawain*-poet's response to mountainous landscapes, has the striking phrase "clynterand torres" (4863) to describe "tors rugged with ledges and precipices". The word is of Celtic origin, probably from Old Welsh *torr* "bulge, belly, boss". Its distribution in place-names and dialect is sufficiently odd to have produced two contrasting explanations. The word is concentrated both in the extreme south-west of England, in Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall, with a few instances in southern counties, and in Derbyshire and adjoining parts of north Staffordshire and east Cheshire. The view that the word originated in Cornwall and was carried north by migrating Cornish miners[11] has more recently been challenged

by K. Cameron, who can find no evidence for such northward migration. On the contrary, he adduces evidence that throughout the fourteenth century Derbyshire miners were impressed to work in the royal stannaries in the south-west, and therefore the element *torr*, Cameron concludes, was probably native to Derbyshire.[12] Its early occurrence in the High Peak and later frequency in place-names and field-names in Derbyshire and in neighbouring Staffordshire, as well as its occurrence in the north-western alliterative poetry seem to confirm this conclusion. There is, for example, Gib Torr in the moorlands north of Leek or a few miles further north Shining Tor, halfway between Macclesfield and Buxton.

clynt, nabb, sckerre, pike

The stormy sea passage in *The Destruction of Troy*, which mentions *torres* (1983), contains several other hill-words and some expressive adjectives, one of them *clent* "steep" in the phrase "a clent hille", cognate with *clynt* which denotes "a rocky cliff, ledge or rock, or steep bank", a word confined almost wholly to northern England and Scotland. My Cheshire informant does not know the word, but the poet of *The Wars of Alexander* did and used it in a passage which creates admirably the impression of almost totally unnegotiable mountains:

Till he was comen till a cliffe at to þe cloudis semed,
þat was so staire and so stepe, þe store me tellis,
Miʒt þar no wee bot with wyngis win to þe topp.
ʒit fand he clouen þurʒe þe clynt twa crasid gatis.
(*Wars Alex* 4827-30)

Another northern, non-alliterative poem, *Cursor Mundi*, uses the word in the alliterating phrase "in to clinttes and in to clous" in line 17590 of the Cotton text, but it is certainly very rare.[13] The other published versions of the poem read respectively *clyffe, cliftes*, and *clif*.

Clynt is one of a further group of uncommon words, nearly all of Scandinavian origin, which occur in only one or two of the alliterative poems and are also found in the toponymy of the real *Gawain* country. The poet of *The Wars of Alexander* is the only one to use *nabb, sckerre*, and *pike*;

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11. A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Sussex* (English Place-Name Society vol. VI and VII, Cambridge, 1929) I, p. 37 n.

12. K. Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, III, pp. 709-10.

13. *Cursor Mundi*, ed. R. Morris (E.E.T.S., O.S. 62, London, 1876).

how also occurs in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*; Langland uses *toft* in the sense of "a hillock in flat country"; and the *Gawain*-poet alone uses *scowte* and *slente*. *Nabb* (Old Norse *nabbi, nabbr*) denotes "a projecting peak or point of a hill" and is used once in *The Wars of Alexander* 5494 in the same contextual manner as the word *lawe* in line 5485 to describe the place where the twenty-two kings are "enclosed". In Lancashire it occurs as the element Nab in a personal name of 1324 (Kristensson, p. 37) and it is found in place-names, chiefly minor names, in several counties of Scandinavian settlement. The combination Nab Scar, which occurs in north Yorkshire and in Cumbria, combines *nabb* with *sckerre* (Old Norse *sker*) "a rock, scar, scaur", also used once in *The Wars of Alexander*, in a very hilly passage, in the powerfully sonorous line,

Scutis to þe scharpe schew sckerres a hundreth.
(*Wars Alex* 4865)

The dialectal meaning of *scar* as "a bed of rough gravel" (AHS II, p. 124) has a not improbable parallel in the response "a mine hole, same as the Devil's Grave" offered to this word by my elderly dialect informant from Alderley Edge. The word occurs in a few late place-names in north-west Derbyshire and in north-east Cheshire, as in the rocky escarpment called The Scaurs east of Macclesfield, and there are other instances to the north, as in the personal name Tho. del Skerr recorded in Yorkshire c. 1346 (Kristensson, p. 40). The Scottish usage of "skerry" retains the Old Norse meaning of "an isolated rock in the sea".

The word *pike* derives from Old English *pīc* "a point", which is not recorded in any topographical sense but is cognate with *pēac* "knoll, hill, peak" which occurs in the Derbyshire Peak. *Pike* developed the common north-country meaning "a pointed or conical hill" or simply "a hill". It may also have been influenced by a Scandinavian cognate which survives as Norwegian dialectal *pik* with a similar meaning (AHS II, p. 63). The word also occurs in the place-names of counties, like Essex and Kent, which are at some remove from Scandinavian influence. The *English Dialect Dictionary* records the topographical meanings in Gloucestershire and west Derbyshire and thence northwards, and it may be present in some Cheshire field names. In *The Wars of Alexander* 4818 the word occurs once as an alliterating hill-word in the rather nondescript line.

þan past þai doun fra þat pike into a playn launde.

howe, toft, scowte, slente

The same poem shares with *The Awntyrs off Arthure* the word *howe* which in areas of Scandinavian settlement probably represents Old Norse *haugr* rather than Old English *hōh*. The latter is used variously in topography to denote "a promontory, a projecting piece of land in the bend of a river or in more level ground, a ridge" and in north-country dialects "a steep glen, a deep cleft in the rocks" (AHS I, pp.256f.). The former generally denotes "a natural or an artificial mound, a hillock, knoll, or tumulus" as in the Derbyshire Ramshaw or the Cheshire place-name Rainow, "raven's hill". There is no indication that either of the two poets who used this word was thinking of any particular kind of mound or hill; indeed, the opposite meaning "glen" would serve as well:

Be hiȝe hillis and howis and be holuȝe dounes.
(*Wars Alex* 3486)
The huntes þei halowe in hurstes and huwes.
(*Awnt Arth* 57)

The only occurrence of *toft* in alliterative poetry in the sense of "a hillock in flat country" is Langland's description of "a tour on a toft" early in *Piers Plowman* (B Prol 14 and B I, 12). The word, whose original meaning is "a building plot, a curtilage" or "a homestead" as in the Derbyshire name Hardstoft, Hert's homestead, in Scarsdale hundred, probably acquired the secondary sense of "a low hill" wherever raised ground offered the most suitable building sites in marshy or similar terrain (cp. AHS II, pp. 181ff.). Langland's tower on a *toft*, contrasted with "a deep dale byneþe", is designed to drive home a spiritual truth, however, rather than create an accurate scenic effect.

The *Gawain*-poet uses *scowte* (Old Norse *skúti*) once in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2167, in a resonant line,

þe skwez of þe scowtes skayned hym þoȝt,

which recalls line 4865 of *The Wars of Alexander*, quoted earlier, but there *scutis* is a verb, "to project". The word *scowte* survives in the Derbyshire Kinder Scout, of which there are only late forms, but is apparently as uncommon in place-names as in poetry. There is sufficient evidence, however, to determine its meaning as "a high or projecting rock, hill, or ridge". It seems to belong particularly to the north-west and north-west midlands. A parallel similar to that between *scowtes* and *scutis* is provided by the

Gawain-poet's phrase "slentyng of arwes" (*Gaw* 1160) and his line

> Byȝonde þe broke, by slente oþer slade,

in *Pearl* 141, where *slente* means "a hill-side or gentle hill-slope" and could be either of Old English or of Old Norse derivation (cp. Old Swedish *slind* "side"). Although alliteration may have determined the use of both *scowtes* and *slente* by this poet, the former appears to possess more likely local associations, whereas the latter word, in its dialect form *slent* "slope", belongs rather to eastern England and Scotland. I have found no other instance of *slente* in alliterative poetry.

rokke, roche, rocher

Among words meaning more specifically "rock, rocky hill" the group *rokke, roche, rocher* is of interest. The first two appear to be treated as largely synonymous by many of the alliterative poets and place-names do not help in differentiating them. *The Wars of Alexander*, for example, juxtaposes them as apparent synonyms in "rochis and rogh stanes, rokkis vnfaire" (4864). Yet it may be possible to attempt some differentiation. When the poet of *The Destruction of Troy*, for example, draws his picture of King Nauplius's kingdom at the beginning of Book XXXII, he seems to denote by *roches* the rocky and rugged edges or ridges of hills, whereas *rokkes* are the coastal outcrops that show above the water until covered by the high tide:

> After a syde of the sea, sothely to telle,
> Was a-party a prouynse, pight full of hilles,
> With roches full rogh, ragget with stones,
> At the full of the flode flet all aboue,
> By the bourdurs aboute, bret full of rokkes.
> (*Destr Troy* 12557-61)

All occurrences of *rokke* in this poem are associated with the sea, and the *Gawain*-poet similarly uses the word for the mountain top of Ararat on which the Ark comes to rest above the waters of the Flood in *Cleanness* 446, and to denote the submarine rocks negotiated by the whale in *Patience* 254. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and in *Pearl*, on the other hand, the word *rokke* denotes inland features, of which the guide's directive to Sir Gawain to ride "doun þis ilk rake bi ȝon rokke syde" (2144) is the most specific. In the phrase "renkkes in þat ryche rok" in *Cleanness* 1514 *rok* is

probably a different word. As the poet had earlier placed Babylon "on a plat playn" (1379), *rok* is unlikely to have its topographical meaning in line 1514, and J. J. Anderson's rendering "that splendid company",[14] following most previous editors, makes acceptable sense.

Roche appears to be more readily associated with adjectives denoting hardness and ruggedness, not necessarily alliterating, and with the idea of shelter. Three of the manuscripts of *The Awntyrs off Arthure* read at line 81

> Thay ranne faste to the roches for reddoure of þe raynne,

as the equivalent of Lambeth's reading "to resettyng þei ronne", and the reading *roches* could well be suspect were it not for corroboration of the connotation of shelter or resting place from other poems. Thus in *William of Palerne* there are two clear instances (2367, 2724), and in *The Destruction of Troy* Pyrrhus has gone to "þe rocis to rest hym a qwyle" (13587). The words "he in þe roche stoppis" are applied to the incident in *The Wars of Alexander* (5496) in which twenty-two kings are "enclosed" on a mountain top or in a pass, also referred to, as we noted earlier, as "a straite lawe" and "þe nabb"; hence the suggested connotations of *roche* as some kind of sheltered spot in a rocky locale may here have been extended to the two other hill-words as well. The association with hardness is borne out by the *Gawain*-poet's adjective "in roche grounde" (*Gaw* 2294) which E. M. Wright explained as equivalent to the Cheshire and Shropshire word *rochy*, meaning "hard, gravelly"[15] as well as by such epithets as "harde" and "ragged" in several of the poems. The word *roche* occurs in some place-names in the real *Gawain* country, like the Cheshire Roach-Hey Wood, located at a steep bluff over the river Goyt in Macclesfield hundred.

The third word in this group is *rocher* and it is quite uncommon. A. H. Smith does not list it as a place-name element, although it is given by Dodgson,[16] and in alliterative poetry it occurs only in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, once in the singular and twice in the plural. The

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14. The word is presumably the same as in "all the Remnond and Roke" in *The Destruction of Troy* 7149, and may be related to *ruck*, common in midland, north-western, and northern dialects with the meaning "heap, mass, throng".

15. E. M. Wright, "Notes on 'Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight'", *Englische Studien* 36 (1906) 218.

16. J. McN. Dodgson, *The Place-Names of Cheshire* (English Place-Name Society vol. LIV, Cambridge, 1981) Part V, p.319, where three examples are given, two of them field names.

only other occurrences known to me, in the plural *rochers*, are in two consecutive lines (7081, 7082 of the Bodleian MS) of the metrical romance *Kyng Alisaunder*.[17] In the plural the most likely meaning is that of "a series of rocky cliffs forming an escarpment", as Mrs Wright first suggested in the same article, on the strength of dialect usage in Derbyshire and Yorkshire; while in the singular the only occurrence of the word in the line "þer as þe rogh rocher vnrydely watz fallen" (*Gaw* 1432) suggests a definite landmark. The definite article and the unusual word combine to point to some particular tumbled mass of rock such as is to be found in various places in the North Staffordshire moorlands close to the Roaches, the steep rocky bank or escarpment of nearly two miles in length above the valley of Leekfrith, which answers strikingly to the poet's echoing *rocherez* (*Gaw* 1427, 1698) at the heart of the real *Gawain* country. That the poet used the uncommon word *rocheres* rather than *roches* may indicate local usage which has not survived in the name *Roaches*, or may have been intended as a signal to alert the audience to a local feature which would have been familiar but might have been overlooked under a more common appellation. The word *rocher* occurs occasionally in later works from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. In French, whence it originates, it is attested in the Middle Ages, but cited as a variant of *rochier* and simply glossed "Fels" in Tobler-Lommatzsch.[18]

bache, clough, gille, hope

Valley-words are fewer in number. One of the most distinctive midland words is *bache* (*beche* in the east midlands), from Old English *bece, bæce* "stream valley". The word worried the reviser of the original version of Layamon's *Brut* who in three passages (381, 1299, 10866) substituted other words for it or removed it.[19] Langland was familiar with *bache*, and the new editions of the A and B texts of *Piers Plowman* have rightly turned Skeat's "valays and hilles" into the more characteristic "baches and hilles" (A VI, 2; B V, 514). The meanings of *bache* range from "a valley" to "a stream in a valley", to "a field or piece of flat ground near a stream in a valley", and even to "a tract or moorland". The Derbyshire Beighton at the northern tip of

17. Ed. G.V. Smithers, (E.E.T.S., O.S. 227, London, 1952).
18. Tobler-Lommatzsch, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*, VIII (Wiesbaden, 1971) s.v. *rochier*.
19. Laʒamon: *Brut*, ed. G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, 2 vols. (E.E.T.S. 250 and 277, London, 1963 and 1978).

Scarsdale hundred is the *tun* "farm" by the stream (*bache*) and at Rainow near Macclesfield the name Patch may represent *bache*, as the *English Dialect Dictionary* suggests, and in the same township lies Thursbitch, the demon's valley. The name Patch Head near Dove Head Spring north-east of Flash by the Staffordshire-Derbyshire boundary may contain the same element. The sense of "stream" is intended in the mention of "baches woxen ablode a-boute in þe vale" in *The Siege of Jerusalem* 559. This use and Langland's are the only instances I have found in the alliterative poems. In place-names the word is most common in the midlands, as in Sandbach in Cheshire, Hawkbach in Staffordshire, or Burbage in Derbyshire. The personal name Will. de la Bache is cited by the *Middle English Dictionary* from Cheshire A.D. 1296 and Löfvenberg (p. 5) cites other examples from Worcestershire. The word survives in the dialect of my Cheshire informant with the meaning of "a piece of land, flatter than a vale", and its frequency in Cheshire names is attested by Dodgson.

Three other characteristic valley-words of the *Gawain* country are *clough, gille*, and *hope*. *Clough* "deep valley, ravine, clough", probably of Old English origin, is common in dialects and place-names northwards from Staffordshire and Derbyshire (AHS I, p. 99), and is found in fourteenth-century personal names like Henr. del Fayreclogh from Lancashire (Kristensson, p. 60). At the heart of the real *Gawain* country are numerous ravines and smaller valleys with names like Deepclough, Oaken Clough, Tagsclough, and Wildboarclough. Alliteration of *cloughes* (also *clowes, clewes*) with *clyffes* occurs in *Morte Arthure* 2013, 2019, and with *cragges* in line 941, as well as in line 150 of *The Awntyrs off Arthure*. The Thornton manuscript of the latter poem reads "in cleues so clene", at line 67 where Douce has "within schaghes [woods] schene", and in line 129 Thornton's "in the clewes" appears as "in þe skowes [woods]" in Douce: in both cases unfamiliarity with the word appears to have caused Thornton's cloughs to become Douce's woods. *Cursor Mundi*, as we noted earlier, alliterates it with the rare word *clinttes*, and it occurs occasionally in other northern texts. In *Morte Arthure* 2396 occurs the phrase "in theis kleuys, enclesside with hilles", which the *Middle English Dictionary* cites as the only (queried) instance of the meaning "a narrow valley" produced by a formal blend of Old English *clif* "cliff" and *clifa* "cleft, chasm". It is more likely that the word is yet another variant spelling of *cloughes*.

Gille also denotes "a narrow rocky valley or ravine". It derives from Old West Scandinavian *gil* and is common especially "in the mountainous regions of the Yorkshire

Pennines and the Lake District settled by Norwegian Vikings" (AHS I, p. 200). It occurs in place-names and personal names from Derbyshire northwards and the rare south-eastern forms may be, as the *Middle English Dictionary* suggests, borrowings from the north or derive from a hypothetical Old English **gyll*. In dialect usage the word generally refers to a wooded valley, a sense borne out by the poet of *The Awntyrs off Arthure* associating "greues and gylles" (418). As there are no "glens" in the alliterative poems, although the element is found in place-names, *gille* provided occasionally useful g-alliteration, as in "he glode thurgh the gille by a gate syde" (*Destr Troy* 13529).

Alliteration may also account for the two instances found of *hope* "a hollow among hills, a small enclosed valley, especially one overhanging the main valley", a sense of Old English *hop* not in evidence before the Middle English period and found with this meaning especially in the midlands and north (AHS I, p. 260). Old Norse *hōp* "a small inlet or bay" may be the root in these cases, rather than Old English *hop* which denotes "a plot of enclosed land, especially in marshes or fens" and is found thus in some eastern place-names and recorded in personal names from Sussex (Löfvenberg, p. 107). The sense of "valley" is found in place-names and field-names in various midland and northern counties, including Staffordshire, Cheshire, and Derbyshire, and in personal names like Rob. de la Fonhope, Herefordshire A.D. 1279 (Kristensson, p. 61). In *The Wars of Alexander* occurs the phrase "be-twene twa hillis in a hope" (5390), and the poet of *Morte Arthure* employs the word similarly for alliteration with *hymland* "border-lands" and *hillys*:

> Thorowe hopes and hymlande, hillys and other.
> (*Morte Arth* 2503)

coue, dene, cumbe, slake, dell

At line 5422 of *The Wars of Alexander* the hero and his company enter "a vale full of vermyn" which is also referred to as "a deyne" (5421) and "þe coue" (5427), both of them very rare words in alliterative poetry. Indeed, *coue* occurs only here, as a synonym for valley, although as an element with various related meanings, "shelter, a narrow valley, a cove", it is found in place-names in Cheshire and Staffordshire and other, mainly more southerly, counties. The usual Old English word for valley was *denu*, whence Middle English *dene*, found on the map wherever valleys exist, although in the Danelaw it was frequently replaced by Scandinavian *dalr* (AHS I, p. 130), and in some areas more local words were

often used instead, like *clough* in north-east Cheshire and north-west Derbyshire. The poet of *The Wars of Alexander* (5421) uses *dene* for alliteration; the *Gawain*-poet uses it for rhyme in *Pearl* 295:

> þou says þou traweȝ me in þis dene.

In none of these instances does either *coue* or *dene* suggest any special connotations.

On the other hand, the poet of *Mum and the Sothsegger* may deliberately have chosen a west-country word, *cumbe*, as he leads up to the most elaborate scenic description in the poem, of which the editors remark that "the prospect is a typical view of the West Country" (Day and Steele, p. 121). The poet's line (878),

> Yn a cumbe cressing on a creste wise,

as he climbs steadily and "myrily to maistrie þe hilles" suggests with particular fitness one of the dialectal meanings of *cumbe*, "the head of a valley", in this instance clearly visualized with a sense of topographical precision. The word is common in south-western and south-west midland counties and occurs in Cheshire and Derbyshire place-names. It is rare in Yorkshire and the east midlands.

Another word rarely found in poetry is *slake*, from Old West Scandinavian *slakki*, which combines the meanings of "a hollow in the ground, a shallow depression" with that of "a small shallow valley". My Cheshire informant knows the word as current in his dialect with the meaning of "a boggy valley", a conflation of the dialectal *slake* and *slack* recorded in the *English Dialect Dictionary*. In *Morte Arthure* 3719,

> Thane was it slyke a slowde in slakkes fulle hugge,

the picture is one of numerous watery hollows on the seashore after the tide has receded, and it is here that Sir Gawain meets his death. The word was most probably adopted from this passage by the poet of *The Awntyrs off Arthure* who predicts the knight's death thus:

> Gete þe, Sir Gawayn,
> The boldest of Bretayne;
> In a slake þou shal be slayne.
> (*Awnt Arth* 296-8)

The word occurs in north-midland and northern place-names and minor names, quite frequently in Cheshire and in north-

west Derbyshire, for example, and in personal names like Henr. del Slake, recorded in fourteenth-century Lancashire (Kristensson, p. 40).

A valley-word of pure convenience is *dell*, found in place-names almost wholly in the south, but known in northern dialects as "a little dale, a narrow valley" and also as "a pit". The latter sense well fits the phrase "deuelys delle" in *The Castle of Perseverance* 3125. In *The Awntyrs off Arthure* "þe (depe) delles" twice provides an easy rhyme for the formulaic "frithes and felles" (6, 51) and similar mechanical instances occur in the Scottish alliterative poems.

slade, dale, vale, valay

Finally, there is a group of four valley-words, all of which occur in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: *slade, dale, vale*, and *valay*. Of these the least common is *slade*, generally glossed simply "valley", although A. H. Smith admits that the word may have possessed "some more particular application which has not yet been determined". In Cheshire the *English Dialect Dictionary* notes the dialectal meaning "a hollow with wooded banks" and this occurs as an element in occasional minor names in various parts of the country. Dodgson records the fourteenth-century Cheshire personal name Sladehurst, literally "wood or hill at a valley", from Northwich hundred (Part II, p. 280). Similar is the sense of "a broad strip of greensward between two woods"; both meanings connote wooded slopes. The word is known to my informant from Alderley Edge only as an element in place-names and field-names. The sense of "a slope or bank" is suggested by the phrase "by slente oþer slade" in *Pearl* 141, where *slente*, as we noted earlier, means "a hill-side or gentle hill-slope". A similar meaning attaches to *slade* in *Morte Arthure* 2978 where it is equated with *slope* "hill-side" in the previous line. Despite the demands of four lines of alliteration on *sl-*, the poet presumably felt that such semantic equating was permissible. At the same time, the phrase "sexty slongene in a slade" (*Morte Arth* 2978) illustrates the ready association of *slade* with "slaughter" for purposes of alliteration, a combination exploited to the full in *The Destruction of Troy* where all nine occurrences of *slade* can be thus accounted for.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the guide is made to point almost in the same breath, in succeeding lines (2146-7) to "þe launde" and "þat slade" where connotations of woodland are appropriate, and when earlier in the poem does are "dryuen with gret dyn to þe depe sladez" (1159) woodland

is again mentioned ("vnder wande", 1161). Only the bare "in sclade" in *Pearl* 1148 appears to be purely formulaic. Chaucer, incidentally, does not use *slade* at all. The evidence is slender, but dialectal usage, the occasional combination of *slade* in place-names with words denoting trees or wood, and the handful of instances in the alliterative poems suggest that the word may have denoted "a slope or bank" as well as "a valley" and that it may have possessed connotations of woodland.

Chaucer does use the word *dale*, however, mainly in rhyme, and in *Sir Thopas* in the form of the familiar clichés to which other poets, alliterative and rhyming, were only too prone. The association of *dale* with "deep", inherited from Old English, was alliteratively inevitable and was probably topographically justified. There is frequent alliteration also with *dounes* and the verb *dryue*, and many occurrences of *dale* can be thus explained, as in the case of the *Gawain*-poet, who conjoins *drof* with *dale* twice (*Gaw* 1151, 2005), with *doun* once (*Pearl* 121), and with *depe* once (*Cleanness* 384). Only from the non-alliterating "ryȝt to þe dale" at the end of line 2162 in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as Sir Gawain descends towards the locale of the Green Chapel, can a more deliberate topographical intention in the use of the word be gleaned. Here the emphasis is on ruggedness and wildness, and on the steep descent. If *slade* connoted wooded valley slopes, *dale* suggests depth and downward descent into it. The contrast between the depth of the dale and the heights above is similarly pointed in *Morte Arthure* 3250-1:

> Than discendis in the dale, downe fra the clowddez,
> A duches . . . ,

where it is tempting to take *clowddez* as meaning "lofty hills", and in *Mum and the Sothsegger* 932-3, where the speaker, having surveyed that "typical West Country prospect",

> moued dovne fro þe mote to þe midwardz
> And so a-dovne to þe dale.

Langland, as we noted earlier, similarly juxtaposes the conspicuous tower on a *toft* with "a deep dale byneþe" (*Piers Plowman* B Prol. 15), but in view of the normal meaning of *toft* the contrast here is less a topographical one between a high hill and a deep valley than the symbolic one between tower and dungeon. In place-names *dale* is a common element and where it is topographically appropriate, in more north-

ern parts, it may represent Old Norse *dalr* rather than its Old English cognate. In Old Norse literature, as in Old English, the alliterating combination "deep dales", *djúpir dalir*, is to be found, as in *Hárbarðsljóð* 18,[20] and the word is common in compounds and local names. We may thus regard *dale* as possessing a high alliterative rating in Middle English, as being ready to hand for formulaic phrases, and as connoting primarily the depth of a valley.

Vale and *valay* both derive from Old French. Chaucer uses *valay* half a dozen times, but *vale* only once, with a proper name in "the vale of Galgopheye" in *The Knight's Tale*. But there is no discernible system with proper names: we find both the vale and the valley of Jehoshaphat, and the vale of Viterbo and the valley of Jordan and so forth in Middle English literature. What is certain is that contrary to Chaucer's usage *vale* is common in alliterative poetry and *valay* is rare. Several poets seem to regard *vale* as an appropriate non-alliterating word with which to end a line: for example, nearly half the occurrences of the word in *The Wars of Alexander* and *The Siege of Jerusalem*, three out of the *Gawain*-poet's four uses, and all five instances in *The Destruction of Troy* are of this sort. The poet of *Morte Arthure* uses *vale* three times as often as *dale* but restricts its application almost entirely to two locations and here the word alliterates in most of its occurrences. In place-names both words are uncommon, but *vale* is a little less so than *valay* and it usually denotes a wide valley, like Vale Royal in Cheshire or the Vale of Evesham in Worcestershire. My Cheshire informant grades *vale* as "not as steep as a valley", while *dale* is presumably steeper than either. The *Gawain*-poet reserves *valay* for two specific references to the locale of the Green Chapel, neither of them at all formulaic:

Til þou be broʒt to þe boþem of þe brem valay,
(*Gaw* 2145)
And we ar in þis valay verayly oure one.
(*Gaw* 2245)

Apparently this was as distinctive a word for him as *rocherez* or *knot* or *knarre*, or words drawn from other topographical categories not discussed in this paper. Such words look like lexical signals pointing to topographical landmarks, in the case of *valay* to some very particular valley. Moreover, as the word *valay* appears doomed in the new texts

20. *Edda*, ed. G. Neckel, 3rd ed. rev. H. Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1962).

of *Piers Plowman*, probably correctly so, its rarity increases. It makes a nonce alliterating appearance in *Mum and the Sothsegger* II, 150, and occurs once in the Scottish poem *The Pistill of Susan* in rhyme at the end of line 215 where it is not so much suspect (all the versions agree) as inappropriate in introducing a *valay* into an enclosed *pomeri* or fruit-garden.

In conclusion, the following points emerge from the preceding discussion. There is an impressive range and variety in the Middle English topographical vocabulary, of which the hill and valley words provide a representative specimen. Not surprisingly, because much of the alliterative poetry deals with "aunters" and because mountains are as a rule more striking, more difficult, more hazardous than valleys, there are roughly twice as many words for hill as for valley. Alliteration and, where appropriate, rhyme play an important part in the range of these words, in their often formulaic patterning, and in the choice of a particular word made by a poet in any given line. This choice is often prosodic and not contextual, but there are sufficient instances where it is not and where other reasons must be sought. These may be stylistic reasons, like the sound of a word, as in the line

Scutis to þe scharpe schew sckerres a hundreth
(*Wars Alex* 4865)

with its unique choice of *sckerres*. Or else, a word may be used because the poet and possibly his audience knew it as an intimately familiar part of their local speech and in local place-names and personal names. Of this kind are words like *coppe, egge*, and *torre*, which figure in Dr Plot's interesting list of typical Staffordshire hill words,[21] as well as valley words like *bache, hope*, and *slake*, and some words of this type, as we have seen, are still familiar in local north-east Cheshire dialect. Or again, a word may have definite local reference for poet and audience: in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* this is obviously true of the place-names mentioned in the poem—*Norþe Wales, Anglesay, Wyrale*—and may be true also of some of the more esoteric terms used in this poem, words like *knot* and *knarre* and possibly *valay*.

Correlation between some of the less common topographical terms used in the alliterative poems and their occurrence in place-names within reasonably definable limits of

21. Robert Plot, *The Natural History of Staffordshire* (Oxford, 1686) p. 110.

the north-west and the west and north-west midlands may be possible in some cases. The word *gille*, for example, belongs to regions settled by Norwegian vikings and occurs in only two of the poems where it accords with the dialectal characteristics of the surviving texts. Somewhat less narrowly, the word *clough* is a northern and north-west midland term and would most likely have been used by poets familiar with such features in their countryside.

The widest range of hill and valley words in the alliterative poetry is in *The Wars of Alexander* and several distinctive topographical terms are unique to it, for example, *nabb, pike, sckerres*, while some others, like *howe* and *hope*, are shared by only one other poem. The poet responds vividly to mountainous scenery, but he clearly did not care for it. He talks of hideous hills, villainous vales, and dreary dales, no doubt infusing the alliterating epithets with some personal feeling. The words he employs point unmistakably to the region whose dialect he uses, but his landscapes, tracing adventures in foreign parts, are nowhere so sharply visualized that they can be regarded as drawn, as it were, from the map. This is true also, albeit to a lesser extent, of the poet of *Morte Arthure* who creates some vivid landscapes with the help of an interesting topographical vocabulary some of which is undoubtedly western despite the suggested north-east midland provenance of the surviving text. And it is true also for the celebrated prospect in *Mum and the Sothsegger* which, despite an occasional local touch like the use of *cumbe*, describes the vista opening before the poet-narrator very much in the enumerative manner of a traditional *descriptio loci*. Even Langland's landscapes, localized though they are by his reference to the Malvern hills and by his use of some characteristic west-midland terms like *bache*, are spiritual rather than actual places.

Only the *Gawain*-poet, as one critic has put it, "achieves scenic effects such as are quite rare in Middle English literature",[22] despite the fact that his topographical vocabulary is not as rich as that of the man who composed *The Wars of Alexander*. He too has his share of unusual terms, distributed among his four poems, but he used these with much greater skill and subtlety to create in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* landscapes which generations of readers have somehow felt to be "real". There can be little doubt that the region to which his words, his sharply visualized landscapes, and toponymy all point can be narrowed down to quite a small area at the heart of the real *Gawain*

22. D. Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London, 1968) p. 204.

country. It is here, in the moorlands of the southern Pennines where the counties of Cheshire, Staffordshire, and Derbyshire adjoin, where northern as well as more southerly and south-western words co-exist, that the poet's hill and valley words, as well as other topographical terms, fit in with local place-names and with specific, indeed still identifiable features of the local landscape.[23]

WOODS AND FORESTS IN THE 'GAWAIN' COUNTRY

Much of the outdoor action in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* takes place in wooded country, yet no attempt has so far been made to evaluate the words used to describe woodland and forest scenery in the poem, to compare the *Gawain*-poet's usages with those of other Middle English alliterative poets, and to link these with the toponymy of the north-west midlands of England. Woods and forests are of course not permanent features of a landscape, and links or parallels with local place-names or specific places are consequently much harder to establish than in the case of hills and valleys or more unusual landscape features like the *forlondez* by the river Dee or the Green Chapel that is both a cave and "a creuisse of an old cragge" (*Gaw* 2182-3). Yet the *Gawain*-poet's silvan vocabulary (to put it thus for the sake of brevity) is of interest, not least because it contributes its share both to the art of the poem and to the verisimilitude of the landscape descriptions which many readers and critics have felt to be exceptional among medieval *descriptiones locorum*.

forest, park

A word of particular importance in romance literature is *forest*. It is used only twice in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: in line 741, as Sir Gawain rides forth on the last stage of his journey to Bertilak's castle, and in line 1149 at the beginning of the first day's hunting. Indeed, the first mention anticipates the second as it would arouse in the contemporary audience expectations of the chase. Topographically, a medieval forest was a largely uncultivated and relatively sparsely inhabited tract of country, some of it covered by woodland; legally, it was an area subject to special jurisdiction, set aside for the preservation of game and the pleasures of the chase. Wirral was no longer a

forest by the time *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was composed, hence the appropriateness, in every sense, of the non-technical word *wyldrenesse* in line 701, but the stretch of country described in 740 ff., leading to the castle, with its mixture of topographical features—hills and woodland interspersed with boggy moors— and its expectation of hunting, is properly a *forest*. The poet of *Morte Arthure* is similarly correct in his use of the word when he makes Arthur give instructions that his "fforestez be ffrythede" (*Morte Arth* 656), that is furnished with woodland to protect his game. Later in the same poem the Romans flee "to a cheefe foreste" also referred to as "the fyrthe", interspersed with tracts of woodland, variously described as *greues*, *schawes*, *holte eynys*, *wode*, and *ryndez* in rich alliterative profusion (*Morte Arth* 1873 ff.). The connotations of hunting are present in the opening stanza of *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, a poem with acknowledged indebtedness to the *Morte Arthure*,[1] but the majority of alliterative poets are rather less discriminating. Alliterating phrases are common, like "firth, forest and fell" repeated several times in the Scottish *Golagros and Gawane*, and the combination of "forest" with "fair" frequently proved irresistible. It is characteristic of the *Gawain*-poet's art that his forest was not "fair" but wild and "ful dep" (*Gaw* 741); and noteworthy also is his use of the word *forest* to describe the expanding dream landscape in *Pearl* (67 ff.) with its changing vistas of woods and plains, hills and valleys and water. Admittedly, the dreamer in *Pearl* is not going a-hunting, but the quest upon which he is embarking as he turns his face "towarde a foreste" is not without symbolic parallels to a hunt.

In addition to its topographical and legal meanings, the word *forest* also possessed obvious romance connotations. What I call the "*Gawain* country" is, after all, primarily a land of romantic adventures, of single knights or whole armies bent upon mainly murderous errands, many of which take place in forests inhabited by wild men and wild beasts. Chaucer, in mischievous mood, fills Sir Thopas's "fair forest" with

> many a wilde best,
> Ye, bothe bukke and hare.
> (*Canterbury Tales* VII, 755-6)

and not surprisingly the Piramus of Chaucer's *Legend of Good*

1. See the Introduction to *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn* ed. R. Hanna III (Manchester, 1974) especially pp. 38 ff.

Women expects to meet a lion in his forest (842-4). Sir Gawain's forest, likewise, is not only "ful dep" but "ferly watz wylde" (741), a dangerous place, "vnblyþe" both for the birds "þat pitosly þer piped for pyne of þe colde" (747), and for Sir Gawain himself. All the greater is the relief when the knight reaches the castle, the *locus amoenus* of romance at the heart of the forest, which contrasts so vividly with the inhospitable winter landscape surrounding it.

While thus exploiting the connotations of the word *forest*, the *Gawain*-poet may also have been thinking of actual forests familiar to him in the real *Gawain* country of the north-west midlands: Cheshire forests like those of Delamere or Macclesfield which lay in the path of anyone travelling east after crossing the Dee; or the "foreste del Peek" as Peak Forest is called *sub anno* 1383 in John of Gaunt's Register, a mountainous wilderness stretching east from the Goyt valley which formed a large hunting forest in the Middle Ages. One who was so patently familiar with all the arts and crafts of hunting as this poet was, must also have known his way around the royal forests of his neighbourhood. He also knew the difference between a *forest* and a *park*, the latter a technical term denoting an enclosed tract of land in which beasts of the chase were kept. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the castle is set within a park surrounded by a sturdy palisade of more than two miles in circumference. That the word is rare in the alliterative poetry is not surprising in view of its restricted meaning, but it is common in place-names to describe such enclosures. The word is originally Germanic whence it was adopted into Old French, and in place-names the meanings of the Old English *pearroc* "an enclosing fence, a plot of ground enclosed with a fence, a paddock" are sometimes difficult to distinguish from the technical sense of Middle English *park*. Such conflation is evident in line 4702 of *The Wars of Alexander*,

Bot pyned þar in a parroke inparkid as bestis,

where *parroke* appears to combine the form of the Old English with the technical sense of Middle English *park*.[2]

The poet of *William of Palerne* repeatedly refers to the neighbourhood where his hero grew up as a "forest", appropriately enough in view of its topographical, hunting, and romance associations, and he is similarly discerning in his

2. Bertil Sundby expresses similar uncertainty regarding the Worcestershire surname "atte Parkgate" in note 66 on p. 148 of *Studies in the Middle English Dialect Material of Worcestershire Records* (Bergen-Oslo and New York, 1963).

use of *park* as an enclosure surrounding a palace "þat whilom wiþ wilde bestes was wel restored" (*Wm Pal* 2846). In *The Awntyrs off Arthure* 148 the word forms part of a list extending over several lines which at first glance looks like a merely mechanical enumeration held together by alliteration:

Of palaies, of parkes, of pondes, of plowes;

but these were all treasures of great worth, investments as we would say today, and parks were indeed considered sources of income. When Medill Elde lists his "renttes and his reches", his revenues and wealth, in *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* 145-6 he boasts

Of purches of ploughe-londes, of parkes full faire,
Of profettis of his pasturs, that his purse mendis.

Such connotations add further to the impression of magnificence conveyed by Sir Gawain's first glimpse of Bertilak's castle shimmering in its woodland setting.

wode, holt

This and other woodland settings in the poem are variously described. The most common word is *wode* with its compounds *holtwodez* and *lyndewodez*. The use of *wode* ranges from the purely formulaic, as in the phrase "in wod so wlonk" (*Gaw* 515), to the quite specific reference to "þe wod" around Bertilak's castle (764). Of all the silvan words in the alliterative poetry *wode* appears to be the most versatile: it can be synonymous with *forest* as well as denote a part of it; it invites sundry epithets, like "grene wode" and "heghe wode" (*Morte Arth* 1281, 2316), "þicke wode" (*Destr Troy* 2362, *Wars Alex* 3857) and "wilde wode" (*Awnt Arth* 315); it connotes tangled undergrowth by being associated with thorns (*Gaw* 1419, *Wars Alex* 3857); it usefully alliterates with *water* in *Pearl* 122 and *Cleanness* 387, or with *welles* as in *Mum and the Sothsegger* 891 or *The Destruction of Troy* 12402; and it is readily differentiated into species. The latter is achieved by either mentioning specific trees or qualifying *wode* with another wood word. The *Gawain*-poet's *lyndewodez* (1178) looks like such a specification, as do the phrase "vndir wod lynd" in *Golagros and Gawane* 123 and similar usages elsewhere, but the word is frequently used in Middle English poetry for "tree" in general without any specific denotation of linden tree. But specific trees do appear alongside *wode*, as in "ʒone bechene wode" or "ʒone okene wode" in *Morte Arthure* 1713 and 2722.

Such combinations are common enough in place-names and minor names as well as in personal names derived from places. Lower Birchwood, for example, is recorded in Scarsdale hundred, Derbyshire, from the thirteenth century, as is Ashwood in High Peak hundred, and the same tree, Old English *æsc* "ash-tree", probably figures in the fourteenth-century Lancashire surname Ad. del Esherwode, discussed by G. Kristensson.[3]

The compound *holtwodez*, already found in *Beowulf*, is used twice by the *Gawain*-poet (*Gaw* 742, *Pearl* 75), on both occasions associated with hilly countryside, as it is in *The Destruction of Troy* 1350,

> Ouer hilles and hethes into holte woddes.

In *Pearl* the word does not alliterate; in the other two instances the word may have been chosen for alliteration. But the connection with hills is not fortuitous, for it is also attested, for the word *holt*, by the *English Dialect Dictionary* in the north country and west Yorkshire, and more tentatively also by the *Middle English Dictionary*. The Derbyshire Holt Wood, for example, just south-east of Matlock in Wirksworth hundred, is certainly in hilly wooded country where the element *holt* is recorded from the thirteenth century. As the alliterative linking of *holtes* and *hilles* was practically inevitable and is indeed quite common, it may well be that in some cases *holt* is simply a convenient synonym for *wode*. But contextual connotations of hilly terrain occur too frequently to be ignored. For example, in the line

> The holttes, and the hare-wode, and the harde bankkes,
> *(Morth Arth* 3544)

the word *bankkes* adds a hill concept not called for by any alliterative considerations, while the words *holt* and *hare-wode* "hoar, grey wood", which are similarly juxtaposed in line 2504 of the same poem, suggest related but not identical concepts. In line 776 of the Dublin MS of *The Wars of Alexander* a contrast is suggested between specific *holtez* and the generic *wode*:

> That þe holtez of þe heer wode and þe hillez scheuen,

where the Ashmole text's "þe holtis and þe haire heere" is obviously suspect. A similar contrast between "the wod" and

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3. See K. Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, pp. 188, 96, and G. Kristensson, *Studies on Middle English Topographical Terms* p. 59.

"the wilde holtis" occurs in *The Destruction of Troy* 2359. When the poet of *Morte Arthure* speaks of "heghe holtez" (1259) and of "huge holtes" (2650), he may be thinking of the height of the trees, but he may with equal probability be alluding to the lie of the land. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, moreover, *holt* occurs three times with reference to the hilly countryside of the hunts, and in line 1697 the word is specifically linked with the echoing *rocheres* of the following line. This may be merely alliterative coincidence, for the keyword here is "hunteres", and there are enough instances of *holt* alliterating with hunting words in other poems to make this something of a commonplace. Yet the *Gawain*-poet chose his words carefully as a rule and the connotations of *holt* are particularly appropriate to hunts. In view of his use of a number of topographical terms of Scandivanian origin, he was perhaps aware of the northern connotation of *holt* as "a rough, stony hill", common in Icelandic usage, and it appears from the examples cited that for other alliterative poets also *holt* signified hilly as well as wooded terrain and that in quite a few cases they thought of *holt* as topographically different from *wode*.

greue, schawe, fryth

The medieval hunting forest, as we noted earlier, consisted of stretches of open country—heathland, moors, marshes—interspersed with tracts of woodland. The whole area, while technically a *forest*, is also described in the poetry by the words *wode* and *fryth*, and both these words were also used to denote smaller tracts of woodland whenever technical accuracy was made subservient to alliterative needs. On the other hand, the words *holt* and *greue* served appropriately to denote woodland or thickets of trees and brushwood within the wider terrain of a forest. The poet of *The Destruction of Troy* equates the two words in his description of Colchis in Book II (331 ff.), and later, in the vision of Paris in Book IV (2345 ff.), he contrasts "þat wode brode" in which Paris goes hunting with "a holte" on a plain, *through* ("þurgh") which, significantly, Paris sees the hart which he then pursues further into the woods and thickets of "Ynde" where this episode is located. The passage in *Morte Arthure* 1873 ff., previously referred to, draws much the same distinction between on the one hand *foreste* and *fyrthe*, the generic terms, and on the other hand the more specific features *greues*, *schawes*, *holte*, and *ryndez*. Only *wode* here remains rather ambiguous:

> To a cheefe *foreste* they chesene theire wayes,

And felede theme so feynte, they falle in the *greues*,
In the ferynne of the *fyrthe*, fore ferde of oure pople.
Thare myght mene see the ryche ryde in the *schawes*,
To rype vpe the Romaynez ruydlyche wondyde,
Schowttes aftyre mene, harageous knyghttez,
Be hunndrethez they hewede doune be the *holte* eynys!
Thus oure cheualrous mene chasez the pople;
To a castelle they eschewede a fewe that eschappede.
   Thane relyez the renkez of the Rounde Table,
ffor to ryotte the *wode*, ther the duke restez;
Ransakes the *ryndez* alle, raughte vp theire feres,
That in the fightynge be-fore fay ware by-leuyde.

Of the second group of words only *ryndez*, here meaning
"trees" is not used by the *Gawain*-poet. *Greue* occurs six
times in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and once in each of
Pearl, Patience, and *Cleanness*. The Old English word *grǣfa*,
grǣfe means "brushwood, undergrowth" whence the Middle
English sense "thicket".[4] In place-names the word is par-
ticularly common in Cheshire and Staffordshire--the "real"
Gawain country--[5] but also occurs in other west midland
counties, as in Derbyshire Youlgreave in High Peak hundred
first recorded in Domesday Book. In Lancashire, so the
English Dialect Dictionary records, the divisions of the
ancient forest of Rossendale were called "greves".
   The common formulaic linking of *greues* with *grene*, which
occurs several times, for example, in *The Awntyrs off
Arthure*, is neatly varied by the *Gawain*-poet's reference to
the Green Knight's cluster of holly,

   þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare;
                                               (*Gaw* 207)

while the more conventional collocation of *greues* with
"green" and "ground" is phrased with unconventional artistry
in the poet's line

   Boþe groundez and þe greuez grene ar her wedez,
                                               (*Gaw* 508)

a simple, yet pleasing variation on the mechanical enumer-
ation found, for example, several times in *The Destruction
of Troy*, as in

4. See P. G. Thomas, "Notes on *The Pearl*", *London Medieval
Studies* I (1938) 223.
5. See A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, Part I, p.
207, hereafter referred to in the text as A. H. Smith.

   Greuys wex grene and þe ground swete.
                                     (*Destr Troy* 1060)

The sense of "thicket" is widely attested in alliterative
poetry. In the hunting scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green
Knight* the word *greue* is thus used, contributing particu-
larly in the fox hunt to the rich connotations of confusion
and entanglement:

   And he [the fox] trantes and tornayeez þurȝ mony tene
   greue,
                                               (*Gaw* 1707)

   Renaud com richchande þurȝ a roȝe greue,
                                               (*Gaw* 1898)

the latter paralleled exactly in the Derbyshire field-name
Ruegreue first recorded *temp*. Henry III. In *Cleanness* 99 the
poet's juxtaposition of *gorste* "scrubland" and *greue* carries
similar connotations of rough countryside. Other examples
come to mind: the stag pushing and "brushing" through dense
undergrowth in *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* 56, for
example, or the poet of *The Destruction of Troy* escaping
from conventional green *greues* when he is describing the
ruined building where Peleus hides in Book XXXV as overgrown
with *greues* and thorns (13448 ff.), or the suggestive, non-
alliterating, linking of "wastis and greues" in *The Wars of
Alexander* 4044.
   The word *greue* is sometimes rendered "grove" by modern
editors, a sense appropriate in a few contexts, as in the
phrase "at Paradys greue" in *Pearl* 321, *pace* P. G. Thomas,
or the "plyande greueȝ" of *Patience* 439, if we adopt J. J.
Anderson's rendering "for that spot was bare of swaying
groves".[6] There is, however, a separate word *grove*, found
in *The Destruction of Troy* 13557, from Old English *grāf(a)*,
grāfe, cognate with *grǣfe* and not always easily distin-
guished from it. It is from this source that modern English
"grove" derives. Although of frequent occurrence in place-
names, minor names, and local surnames, the instance in *The
Destruction of Troy* is the only one I have noted in alliter-
ative poetry.
   To express the notion of "a copse or small wood" the
poets preferred to use *schawe* or, in a couple of more
northerly texts, the Scandinavian-derived cognate *skowe*. In
place-names the latter occurs occasionally in the midlands,
but in the main it belongs to the northern counties; whereas
schawe, according to A. H. Smith (II, 99), is commonest in

6. *Patience*, ed. J. J. Anderson, p. 66.

Lancashire and west Yorkshire and rather less frequent in the midlands and south country. In *Patience* 452 the *Gawain*-poet describes Jonas's bower as

> Bot al schet in a scha3e þat schaded ful cole,

having previously, as we noted, negated any possibility of "plyande greue3" in the very same neighbourhood. Dr Anderson resolves the difficulty by glossing *scha3e* "thicket" in this case, a sense which the *English Dialect Dictionary* records, but which is certainly unusual in alliterative poetry. It thus appears that the poet has in this passage reversed the more usual meanings of *greue* and *schawe*. In *Pearl* 284 he makes the dreamer refer to idyllic "schyr wod-schawe3", using one of the few alliterative compounds carrying on a tradition inherited from Old English poetry. It is perhaps of interest to note that the opposite compound, Shawwood, occurs in the eighteenth century as a place-name in the High Peak hundred of Derbyshire. Epithets like *schyre, schene, faire* attached, not always for alliterative reasons, to *schawe*, as well as the association with birds and birdsong suggest that "schawes" were on the whole thought of as pleasant places. This is certainly true of whatever it was that shaded Jonas's bower and is perhaps most convincingly painted by the poet of *The Wars of Alexander*

> þat ilk sensitife saule mast souorly delyte,
> As in þe woddis for to walke vndire wale schawis,
> Quen all is lokin ouire with leuys as it ware littill
>   heuen.
>
> (*Wars Alex* 4381-3)

What sensitive soul could indeed resist such a charming anticipation of Pope's well-known lines in *Windsor Forest*? The preposition "under" is unusual but here conveys effectively a canopy of leaves, and it is not without its parallel in *William of Palerne* and in toponymy: the field-name Undershawe is recorded in Derbyshire in the fifteenth century, analogous to an even earlier place-name, Underwood, in Wirksworth hundred in the same county.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight schawe* occurs only once, in line 2161, as Sir Gawain rides down into the valley of the Green Chapel "at a scha3e syde". The word itself is emotionally neutral here, although the context lends to it an element of apprehension and foreboding. In some of the other poems the word is, perhaps inevitably, drawn into the context of battles and slaughter, alliterating with "shoot-ing", for example, in *Morte Arthure* 1765 and in *The Parle-*

ment of the Thre Ages 4 (where the target is at least not human), while in *William of Palerne* 178 young William learns "to schote vnder þe schawes scharplyche" in woodland glades hardly less romantic than those in the passage quoted above.

The common silvan word *fryth* is as ubiquitous as *wode* and in place-names is indeed, like *schawe*, found compounded with it. In Derbyshire, for example, Frythewode occurs from the thirteenth century both as a field-name and as a place-name in Elmton parish in Scarsdale hundred. In alliterative poetry the two words are rarely closely associated. In *The Wars of Alexander* 4131-3 the poet appears to be pointing a contrast between stretches of open woodland, *frithis*, along which the men pass, and a deep wood, *wod*, infested as it happens with rhinoceroses, which they have to penetrate:

> þan ferd þai furthe be þe frithis fiftene dais,
> And sa þai willid in-to a wod was full [of] wild bestis,
> Rynoceros, as I rede, þe romance þam callis.

More usually there is formulaic linking of *frythes* with "forests" and "fells", particularly in the Scottish poems which tend to be more mechanical in their topographical descriptions. Thus in *Golagros and Gawane* the phrases "firth, forest and fell" and "firthis and fellis" occur several times, and no less typical of a largely formulaic line is the following:

> With frethis and forestes and fosses so faire.
>
> (*Awnt Arth* 682)

On the other hand, the use of the preposition "over" in a few instances, as in "our firthis and fellis" (*Gol and Gaw* 27) or "ouere frithe and forde" (*Mum and Soth* II, 171), requires a meaning for *fryth* beyond the simple "wood", possibly scrubland or "fenland overgrown with brushwood", as A. H. Smith suggests (I, 190). In their edition of *Mum and the Sothsegger* Day and Steele gloss "firth" in this instance, claiming that this is an example of the metathesized form of the original Scandinavian *fjorðr*, but as the sense of "brushwood" is attested in dialect it provides an acceptable reading in these cases. Yet another meaning, "hedge, fence", is given for *fryth* in both the *English Dialect Dictionary* and the *Middle English Dictionary*, and such may be intended where birds are said to be singing not, as is usual in these poems, "in fryth" (as in *Pearl* 89) but "on þat friþ", as in *William of Palerne* 822:

> And alle freliche foules þat on þat friþ songe.

Along with "foules" there is frequent alliteration of *fryth* with "floures", as in *Morte Arthure* 924 or in Langland's

> I seiʒ floures in þe fryth and hir faire colours.
> (*Piers Plowman* B XI 365)

A neat variation on this formula is achieved in *Morte Arthure*:

> We hafe foundene in ʒone firthe, floreschede with leues,
> the flour of the faireste folke that to thi foo langez.
> (*Morte Arth* 1708-9)

A *fryth* then can be anything from a hedgerow to brushwood, and from a stretch of woodland to deep forest. Rhinoceroses may have been uncommon in medieval English forests, but *fryth* could describe a royal hunting reserve as well as the term *forest* and was thus used of the Peak Forest where the modern Chapel en le Frith was la Chapele in le Frithe in 1330, for example, and of the medieval Duchy of Lancaster chase of Duffield Frith north of Derby. Across the border in Staffordshire is Leekfrith, at the heart of good hunting country where the earls of Chester had a hunting lodge and where later the abbots of Dieulacres were wont to hunt. It is of the spiritual image of such countryside that Langland is thinking when he writes

> And þanne shal Feiþ be forster here and in þis Fryth
> walke,
>
> (*Piers Plowman* B XVII 115)

but it is of actual hunting terrain that the *Gawain*-poet is thinking when he sends Bertilak in hot pursuit of a boar "bitwene a flosche in þat fryth and a foo cragge" (Gaw 1430) or has a servant assigned to guide Sir Gawain "þurʒ þis fryth" (1973, 2151). With equal appropriateness fox and polecat leave Noah's Ark after the Flood and make for the "fryth" in *Cleanness* 534, and when Nebuchadnezzar becomes an outcast later in the poem he wanders, beastlike, "into a fyr fryth þere frekes neuer comen" (*Cleanness* 1680). Even in *Pearl* the symbolism and the connotations suggested by the use of *forest* to describe the varied scenery of the dream landscape are enhanced by repeated reference to it as a "fryth" in the following stanzas (lines 89, 98, 103). When on one occasion the *Gawain*-poet uses this word in the mechanical manner of a formula, "bi frythez and dounez" (*Gaw* 695), he may possibly have done so quite deliberately to

point the contrast between the hero's vague wanderings through the romantic realm of Logres, where stereotyped diction might be expected, and the sharply localized and lexically precise itinerary that follows.

hurst, wald, lee

The words thus far considered are for the most part in common use among the Middle English alliterative poets; the remainder are much less common, and one or two of them have hardly been recognized as silvan words at all. Of topographical terms whose meanings include "wood" *hurst*, for example, occurs only once in the Douce MS of *The Awntyrs off Arthure* in the formulaic "in hurstes and huwes" (57) where the Thornton MS has more familiar synonyms for both words: "in holttis and hillys". The equivalence of *hurst* and *holt* extends to the connotation of hilly terrain, "a wooded eminence", as both A.H. Smith and the *English Dialect Dictionary* define it, a sense found in place-names, local surnames, and older dialect usage throughout Britain.

Equally rare in alliterative poetry is the plural word *waldis*, used twice within eight lines in *The Wars of Alexander* (3792, 3799). Both references are to similar terrain, but the first suggests arid, treeless countryside, whereas the second points to the absence of *waldis*, here "woodland":

> þai droʒe furth be dissert and drinkles þai spill,
> Was nouthire waldis in þar walke, ne watir to fynde.

Both meanings are supported by toponymy. As A.H. Smith notes (II, 239 ff.), the word denotes woodland in Old English and this sense persists in place-names dating from Anglo-Saxon times and in a few Middle English allusions. With the clearing of forests, however, *wald* came to describe open, often elevated countryside and downs, a change graphically illustrated by the substitution in the later version of Layamon's *Brut* of *felde* for the earlier *wald* in line 10023. The poet of *The Wars of Alexander* appears to have been aware of both meanings.

The problematic word *lee* occurs twice in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, once in *Patience* 277, and occasionally in other poems. The editors of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* write, in the note to line 849, that "the phrase *in lee* is obscure" and, deriving it from Old English *hlēo*, gloss "protection, shelter" with contextual meanings of "castle" in line 849 and "comfortable place" in line 1893. In *Patience* there is no problem: Jonas, trapped inside the whale, looks to "where watʒ le best", to where he could most comfortably

find refuge, which is clearly the Middle English descendant of Old English *hlēo* "shelter". This occurs in some other poems too: thus the phrase "lurkede undyr lee" in *Morte Arthure* 1446 clearly belongs here, as do the words "and vneth limpid him þe lee", and barely was shelter secured for him, in *The Wars of Alexander* 2060.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the word *lee* is much more likely, however, to represent the common Old English *lēah* whose primary meaning was "a wood, woodland", leading to the sense of "a natural open space in a wood" and thus to "a woodland clearing" with specific reference to woodland cleared for ploughing or pasture. Modern English "lea", a meadow, derives from this source. The later meanings are attested in dialect and the sense "rough pasture" is still familiar in the contemporary dialect of north-east Cheshire.[7] Bertilak's castle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is set on a mound in an enclosed clearing surrounded by woodland, the grassy "prayere" of the "park" dotted with sturdy trees, such as would provide shelter for game. This locale is twice referred to as a *lee*: quite pointedly as "þat lee" in line 1893, the *locus amoenus* in romance terms, the welcome opening "in þe wod" in topographical terms, where, in sharp contrast to the wild and wintry hunting terrain without, Sir Gawain is able to relax in luxurious comfort. The other and earlier occurrence of the word in line 849 refers to Bertilak, as Sir Gawain scrutinizes him, as worthy

> To lede a lortschyp in lee of leudez ful gode,

a phrase closely echoed by the apostrophe "lordingis in le" in *Golagros and Gawane* 341, a parallel noted by Sue Tester.[8] But she fails to mention that some lines earlier in that poem a pavilion is erected on a piece of land called a "lee",

> Thai plantit doun ane pailyeoun, vpone ane plane lee,
> (*Gol and Gaw* 312)

and that both occurrences of *lee* refer to the same plot of open ground. The editor of the poem rightly glosses "lea, plain" from Old English *lēah*.

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7. I am indebted to Mr Alan Garner for information relating to contemporary dialect usage in the region of Alderley Edge.
8. Sue K. Tester, "The Use of the Word *lee* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Neophilologus* 54 (1970) 184-90.

There is, moreover, place-name evidence to support this interpretation of *lee* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The word is common in place-names and minor names and both M. T. Löfvenberg and G. Kristensson[9] cite instances of personal names containing the element *lēah*, for which *le* or *lee* are not unusual spellings. The prepositions used in personal names indicate various topographical view points: thus we find, for example, all in late thirteenth and fourteenth-century Worcestershire, Nic. in the Lee, Rob. de la Lee, and Joh. atte Lee. In many place-names and surnames *lēah* is suitably qualified, as in the fourteenth-century Staffordshire name Rob. atte Blakkele, "the dark wood or clearing", the Derbyshire name Joh. del Smalleghages, A.D. 1327, made up of the elements *smael, lēah*, and *haga*, "enclosures in the small wood or clearing"; or the Cheshire place-name High Lee in Macclesfield hundred, recorded from the thirteenth century in a profusion of variant spellings. Particularly appropriate to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 849 perhaps is the fifteenth-century Derbyshire field-name Lordsleghe with its reference to the lord of the manor and its echo of Langland's

> As an hewe þat erieth nat auntreth hym to sowe
> On a leye-land aȝeynes his lordes wille.
> (*Piers Plowman* C X, 215-6)[10]

It is therefore probably in the basic sense of "open, cleared place in woodland", with more specific connotations of an habitation in such a woodland clearing, as Bertilak's castle patently was, that the *Gawain*-poet is using the word *lee*.

wande, rys

There are two instances in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where by synecdoche words meaning "bough, branch" designated woodland:

> At vche wende vnder wande wapped a flone,
> (*Gaw* 1161)

and

> Rocheres roungen bi rys for rurde of her hornes.
> (*Gaw* 1698)

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9. M. T. Löfvenberg, *Studies on Middle English Local Surnames*, pp. 117-9, and G. Kristensson, e.g. pp. 50, 86.
10. *Piers Plowman, the C-text*, ed. Derek Pearsall,

Of these, the word *wande*, from Old Norse *vǫndr* "wand, bough", also "a measure", is the more unusual. I have not found it used in the sense of "bough=wood" anywhere else in alliterative poetry, although it occurs earlier in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with the more literal meaning of "staff" (215). The *English Dialect Dictionary* records the senses "switch, stick, rod or bundle of twigs used for punishment", while in place-names and field-names it occurs in areas of Scandinavian settlement with the meaning of "a share of land", a sense also found in north country dialects. Although the phrase "wende vnder wande" has an idiomatic ring about it, it appears to be, in alliterative poetry at least, unique to the *Gawain*-poet.

Old English *hris* means "branch, bough, twig" and survives with these meanings into Middle English, yet the collective sense "brushwood, shrubs, undergrowth" already existed in both the Old English word and its Old Norse cognate. The latter meaning is attested in dialect and in place-names from all parts of England, and may be intended by the *Gawain*-poet in line 1698 as a parallel to "bi a holt syde" of the preceding line. On the other hand, the meaning "bough" is the usual one in the several Scottish alliterative poems which employ *rys*, and here phrases like "vnder the rys" (*The Buke of the Howlat* 89) and "vndir the wod rise" (*Gol and Gaw* 1344) appear as variants of the *Gawain*-poet's "vnder wande", using *rys* instead. Both words were evidently part of the poet's dialect and of his more esoteric silvan vocabulary. But he does not use *ryndez*, from Old English *rind* "bark", to designate trees, as the poet of *Morte Arthure* does in the passage quoted earlier as well as in the unambiguous "the ryndes of the wode" of line 3363, which is even more explicitly described in the line

Thare the ryndez overrechez with reall bowghez.
(*Morte Arth* 921)

"Boughs" are understandably common in the woodlands of the alliterative poems, but I have found no unequivocal examples of the word being used to denote wood.

bush, rone, skrogge

In addition to the more familiar word *greue*, already considered, there are several other words, some of them quite rare, denoting scrubland, thickets, and undergrowth in alliterative poetry. The word *bush, busk* "a bush" is one of these, albeit not a rare word, and in the plural mostly denotes a thicket as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1437

or in the pairing of "busschis and bromes" and "busches and breris" in *Mum and the Sothsegger* III, 19, and III, 75. In *Morte Arthure* 895 and 1634 the word *buscayle* similarly means "a thicket", in the second passage with obvious contextual connotations of "ambush". More interesting, because more unusual, is the word *rone*, from Old Norse *runnr* "a brake, a thicket", which occurs in some north-midland and northern place-names and is found in north-country dialects in the sense of "a tangle of brushwood, thorns, etc.", according to the *English Dialect Dictionary*. It is thus used in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where Bertilak pursues the boar "þurȝ ronez ful þyk" (1466), and similarly in *Morte Arthure* 923 and in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* 161. Probably the same word is used in the description of the rose as "richest on rone" in *The Pistill of Susan* 72. Whether the fourteenth-century Lincolnshire surname Ad. atte Ronesend contains Old English **rān* "a boundary strip", as G. Kristensson avers, or refers to the end of a *rone*, a thicket or piece of scrubland, must remain a moot point, although the latter is quite probable. The word was certainly familiar in areas of Scandinavian settlement.

Only the poet of *Morte Arthure* among the alliterative poets uses the word *skrogge* which means "a stunted bush or tree" in the singular and "brushwood, undergrowth" in the plural. The word occurs in successive lines in the context of the ambush mentioned above:

Lokez the contree be clere, the corners are large;
Discoueres now sekerly skrogges and other,
That no skathelle in the skroggez skorne vs here-aftyre.
(*Morte Arthure* 1640-2)

Occasionally found in midland and northern place-names and minor names, *skrogge* is a north-country and Scottish dialect word of obscure origin and evidently limited literary occurrence.

spenne, strothe, þrich

More controversial and the subjects of some scholarly discussion are the words *spenne, strothe*, and *þrich*. The first is shared by the poet of *The Wars of Alexander* and the *Gawain*-poet, the other two are used only by the latter. *Spenne* has generally been regarded as a topographical development of Old Norse *spenni* "a clasp, a buckle" with some such meaning as "that which spans or joins", that is "fence, hurdle", whence "a piece of land enclosed with a fence". Thus N. Davis in the second edition of Tolkien and

Gordon, and similarly A. H. Smith (II, 136 f.) although the latter admits that these meanings are difficult to determine in place-names or literary contexts. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1074 the tag "in spenne" refers to the locale of the Green Chapel, while in *The Wars of Alexander* 4162 the poet describes how Alexander's tent had been blown down "on þe spene" and the men are gathering up the pieces as they move "fra fild to fild". Two further occurrences of the word in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* describe first the fox, then his pursuer, leaping "ouer a spenne" (1709, 1896) in the course of the third day's hunting.

The explanation which best fits all four occurrences of the word and may will be appropriate also to place-names is derivation from Old French *espine* "thorn", the Latin *spīna* "thorn", *spīnus* "blackthorn", with some of the connotations of the French word carried into Middle English, namely "thorn bush, thorn hedge, thorn thicket". There is similar lowering of original *i* to *e* in other words in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The modern English "spinney" from Old French *espinei*, Latin *spinetum*, "a hedge or thicket of thorns", is cognate but does not appear to be common in place-names until the fifteenth century and the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the year of its first literary occurrence in its modern meaning of "wood, copse" as 1597. A general sense "place with thorn bushes" hence "rough countryside" fits both the *Gawain*-poet's taglike "in spenne" anticipating the wild terrain of the Green Chapel and the place where Alexander's tents were blown down; while the more specific reference to thorn hedges or thickets is wholly appropriate to the connotations of erratic movement and tangled undergrowth evoked by the fox hunt, paralleled by Sir Gawain's own entanglement in the bedroom episode of the third day.

Whether place-names containing the element *spenne* can be similarly explained depends on local topography. But it may well be possible in some cases. The Derbyshire farm name Spend Lane, for example, in Thorpe parish, Wirksworth hundred, is admittedly late, being recorded as Spenlane and Spend Lane in the mid-seventeenth century, but the location on the rough hillside above the Dove is certainly more suggestive of thorn bushes than of something "which spans or joins". Similarly, the thirteenth-century name le Spenelowe in the same hundred is at least as likely to refer to a thorn-covered "low", for which there are topographical parallels, as to "a burial mound in which a clasp or buckle has been discovered",[11] for which parallels are rather less

11. See K. Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, p. xxv.

easy to find. The evidence is not conclusive, but the contexts in which *spenne* occurs as well as the conspicuous awareness of the alliterative poets of the prevalence of briars, brambles, hawthorns, and similar spiny vegetation in the *Gawain* country seem to favour the explanation here proposed.

The same passage in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* which describes the fox evading his pursuers amid the tangled undergrowth also contains *strothe* and þrich. It is worth quoting in full to demonstrate the poet's use of several closely related silvan concepts in order to create a richly connotative texture:

> And he trantes and tornayeez þurʒ mony tene greue,
> Hauilounez, and herkenez bi heggez ful ofte.
> At þe last bi a littel dich he lepez ouer a spenne,
> Stelez out ful stilly bi a strothe rande,
> Went haf wylt of þe wode with wylez fro þe houndes;
> þenne watz he went, er he wyst, to a wale tryster,
> þer þre þro at a þrich þrat hym at ones,
>> al graye.
>> He blenched aʒayn bilyue
>> And stifly start on-stray,
>> With alle þe wo on lyue
>> To þe wod he went away.

<div align="right">(Gaw 1707-18)</div>

The context is one of obstacles which the fox is forced to negotiate: "mony tene greue", that is rough, tangled thickets, through which he twists and turns; hedges along which he doubles, listening for his pursuers; the thorn thicket by a ditch across which he leaps. It is from these that he emerges "bi a strothe rande", by the edge of a stretch of marshy scrub, in the hope of escaping from the wood. But unexpectedly he finds himself at one of the hunting stations where three hounds threaten him at a narrow passage through the undergrowth, and so he changes course and makes off again to the wood. The general sense of *strothe* as "land growing with brushwood", from Old Norse *storð*, is not disputed. Cognate with Old English *strōd* "marshy land overgrown with brushwood" (see A.H. Smith II, 158, 164), the element *storð* is found in place-names and local surnames mainly in areas of Scandinavian settlement. By the fourteenth century both the forms and meaning of the two cognates had become largely fused, or perhaps better confused. The little ditch in the above passage suggests the water one would expect to find in marshy terrain. In the stanza in *Pearl* in which the poet uses *stroþe* once more,

there is even greater emphasis on water. Here there are streams and pools, and in the poet's simile of the gleaming stones in the water resembling the bright stars of a winter sky there is a subtle hint of the stars themselves being mirrored in the water below. In such a context to speak of men asleep on a clear winter's night as dwellers in marshy lands is to evoke deftly the image of myriad sparkles of reflected light which the whole stanza aims to create. "Stroþe-men" (*Pearl* 115) is obviously not to be pedantically restricted to its literal meaning of "dwellers in marshy land growing with brushwood", but as a symbol of country people it is singularly fitting in the context of a vividly evocative stanza.

The word þ*rich* was correctly recognized as a topographical term by Sir Israel Gollancz,[12] and is properly glossed "a narrow passage through the undergrowth" by A.C. Cawley.[13] The *English Dialect Dictionary* records this as one of the meanings of a word, derived from Old English þ*ryccan* "to squeeze", that has a basic sense of "a thrust, a push". The word survives in the north-west midland dialect speech of north Staffordshire and east Cheshire and even in contemporary literature.[14] In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1713 the context of the fox seeking to escape through a narrow passage in the dense undergrowth makes this meaning of þ*rich* quite clear.

hawe, hegge, rawe, erber

Hedges were an important part of medieval rural economy to safeguard domestic animals from marauding beasts. The fox scuttling along the hedges in the above passage is too busy escaping to do damage, but there is plaintive reference to "bores and to [bukkes] þat breken myne hegges" in *Piers Plowman* B VI 30, and hedges figure prominently in the celebrated prospect across the west-midland countryside in *Mum and the Sothsegger* 876 ff. In the opening passage of *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* a hare is pictured as crouching by the hedges (19), the word in this case being *hawes*. This is a very rare word in alliterative poetry but common in place-names and minor names with the normal meaning of "an

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12. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Sir I. Gollancz (E.E.T.S., O.S. 210, London, 1940).
13. *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. A. C. Cawley and J. J. Anderson (London, 1976) p. 223.
14. The phrase "they're thrutched", that is caught in a narrow passage, occurs in Alan Garner's novel *Red Shift*.

enclosure". The *Gawain*-poet uses *hegges* only once, in the passage given above at line 1708, but he uses another word, *rawe*, literally "row", a couple of times in the sense of "hedgerow": In the short line "Bi rawez rych and ronk" (*Gaw* 513) as part of the description of the passing seasons at the beginning of the second fitt; and in *Pearl* 105 as features in the expanding landscape of the dream vision. Both this word, Old English *rāw*, and its cognate Old English *rēw*, are occasionally associated with names of trees or shrubs in place-names, suggesting quickset hedges or rows of trees, although the more usual meaning in place-names is "a row of houses", and in alliterative poetry "a row, rank, or line", as in *Pearl* 545: "Set hem alle vpon a rawe". In some eastern and southern dialects, however, the word *rawe* is recorded in the sense of "hedge" and even "small wood".

The dream vision in *Pearl* takes place in an *erber* (9, 38, 1171), a garden, a word that figures also in the opening stanza of *The Pistill of Susan* where it has the related meaning of "orchard" or even "wood". The corresponding forms which appear in the several manuscripts of the latter poem as *erberi, arborye*, and *arbres*, probably represent the same word. In *Morte Arthure* 3230 ff. Arthur relates a dream in which he found himself in a strange landscape which also featured "arborye and alkyns trees" (3244), a wood and every kind of tree. The word is not common in alliterative poetry nor in place-names. Neither are *orcherd*, used a couple of times in *The Pistill of Susan* and *The Quatrefoil of Love*, or *pomeri* "orchard, fruit garden", which serves as yet another synonym in *The Pistill of Susan* (where ȝarde is similarly used to describe the scene of Susan's encounter with the Elders) and occurs once in a rather nondescript line in *Morte Arthure*,

Was no pomarie so pighte of pryncez in erthe.
(*Morte Arth* 3364)

With these words we are really stepping outside strictly silvan vocabulary, although the alliterative expedient of turning technical terms to more general use inevitably confers wider meanings upon words which would not have been used thus in prose writing or in speech.

One result of the preceding survey has been, I trust, to clarify some meanings and particularly the connotations of the words discussed. Connotations of medieval English words are hard to recapture today, hence it is instructive to recognize that a word like *park* connoted wealth and importance in the fourteenth century much as it did four hundred years later; or that *holt* probably connoted hilly countryside as

well as woodland in alliterative poetry. It is also import-
ant when evaluating a poet's art to understand his use of
technical terms, as in Chaucer's case, and to be aware that
a word like *forest* had important legal meanings as well as
rich literary associations. Furthermore, the value of place-
name study in such a discussion is obvious: the meaning of
lee in the alliterative poems is a case in point. Nor is the
benefit one-sided: the interpretation proposed for *spenne* in
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and *The Wars of Alexander*,
for example, has a manifest bearing upon certain place-names
whose interpretation has so far remained problematical.

The *Gawain*-poet's silvan vocabulary is not exceptional
among the alliterative poets, although words like *strothe*
and þ*rich* do lend some measure of distinctiveness to it.
Much more distinctive of this poet's art are the vividness
and verisimilitude of his natural descriptions. Where most
of the other poets are content to enumerate items, sometimes
assembled with naive incongruity, the *Gawain*-poet singles
out topographical features which properly belong together.
The passage quoted earlier, illustrating the fox's devious
passage through tangled undergrowth, is a fine example of a
descriptio loci bordering on natural realism which cannot
easily be equalled in any other alliterative poem. Even the
best passages elsewhere fall short of its succinct evocation
of individual features, achieved by careful choice of appro-
priate words whose connotations contribute relevant elements
to the total pictorial effect. There are some memorable
silvan scenes in other poems, in *William of Palerne*, for
example, or the "cheefe foreste" in *Morte Arthure* where the
Roman host is trapped, or that thorn-infested ruin in Book
XXXV of *The Destruction of Troy*. Yet the poet of the latter
work spoils an obviously effective scene by dully repeating
"ouergrowen with greues" and "gray thornes" twice each
within seven lines.

As with hills and valleys and streams and other land-
marks, the woodlands and thickets of *Sir Gawain and the
Green Knight* owe not a little of their verisimilitude and
thus of their artistic effectiveness to the landscape of the
north-west midlands where the poem originated, the heartland
of the *Gawain* country which extends from the river Dee to
the Peak District. In this countryside, where people still
use words like "lea" and "thrutch", there are even today
traces of royal forests and enclosed deer parks, and numer-
ous place-names in Cheshire, north Staffordshire, and Derby-
shire contain elements describing woods and scrubland which
figure so memorably in the *Gawain*-poet's diction. This is
not to say that the silvan terrain in *Sir Gawain and the
Green Knight*, or in *Pearl* for that matter, is literally

modelled on actual woodland scenes; we would not recognize
them today if they had been copied straight from the
countryside. What is true, however, is that more than any of
his fellow poets the *Gawain*-poet was able to translate im-
pressions of his surroundings into settings for his narra-
tive. This achievement marks him, in the proper sense of the
term, as the first of the great English nature poets.[15]

8. THE TOPOGRAPHICAL VOCABULARY III:

STREAMS AND SWAMPS IN THE 'GAWAIN' COUNTRY

In this as in the preceding chapters devoted to an examination of the topographical vocabulary of Middle English alliterative poetry I have used the "*Gawain* country" as convenient shorthand both for the countryside of the north-west midlands and northern England in which most of this poetry was composed, and for the fictional landscapes within the poems themselves. The latter range from purely imaginary settings, some of them, as in *The Wars of Alexander*, far removed from England, to tracts of west midland or northern scenery made recognizable by the mention of place-names, as in *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn* or *Piers Plowman*, or by the description of local landmarks as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Such an inclusive shorthand is possible because the fictional landscapes appear to be not infrequently based on the genuine English countryside with which the poets were familiar and which, whenever it is apposite to do so, I call the "real" *Gawain* country. The principal criteria of this resemblance are the links between the topographical vocabulary employed by the alliterative poets and local toponymy, and the use made of this vocabulary in creating fictional settings based on real landscapes.

Taken in conjunction with the words denoting hills, valleys, woods, forest, and scrubland, the evidence of the "water"-words here discussed suggests strongly that the alliterative poets at times drew upon their local map, as it were, when describing landscapes and for words to describe them. The vocabulary itself is in any case of sufficient interest to deserve more attention than it has received hitherto, and the particular qualities of certain landscape descriptions in alliterative poems most frequently commented upon--their effectiveness and their "realism"--may well derive from the poets' familiarity with and response to local landscapes, and their knowledge and use of dialect words endowed with local associations.

Most of the alliterative poems tell of adventures, whether of questing knights or warring kings, or of spiritual pilgrimages as in *Piers Plowman* or *Pearl*, which take place in hilly or mountainous regions where rivers run and forests abound or where, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, large tracts of countryside are mires and marshlands. Hence words denoting the open sea are less common, and the interesting fact emerges that poets often used "inland" "water"-words like northern *borne* or the widely current *broke* or the more specific *dam* to describe the sea. All three of these words are thus used by the *Gawain*-poet. The requirements of alliteration to some extent explain such usages, but as some of the poets probably knew little of the ocean, yet knew a great deal about mountain torrents and inland rivers, it is understandable that they should have recourse to such familiar words.

ee, flum, gufere, rake

The range of words denoting streams of all kinds in alliterative poetry is considerable. There are, on the one hand, the more common words known all over England, like *broke* "brook", *reuer* "river", and *strem* "stream". Similarly, there are common words denoting an expanse of water, like *lake* or *pole* "pool, pond", or the more "technical" *dam* "a stretch of water confined by a dam", or *water* itself, the latter freely used to describe any watery feature. The Old English word *ēa* "river, stream", although common in place-names throughout the country, is rare in literature. It occurs, for example, in *The Wars of Alexander* 5464:

> þan entirs in of his erles and ouire þe ee passis,

where it appears to be used for alliteration. The word survives in several dialects including the east Cheshire dialect of Mr Colin Garner, a septuagenarian craftsman who has lived all his life, as have his forbears, at Alderley Edge, and who responded to *ee* with "a stretch of water; I've heard of it".[1]

At the other extreme are the rare words *flum*, *gufere*, and *rake*. Of these the first, *flum*, occurs five times in *The Wars of Alexander* and once, in the phrase "flom Jordane", the "River Jordan", in *The Quatrefoil of Love* 173. Derived

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1. I am grateful to Mr Alan Garner, himself an authority on East Cheshire dialect, for recording these responses which provide interesting, albeit inevitably limited, corroborative evidence for some of the words discussed.

from Old French *flum*, ultimately from Latin *flumen*, the Middle English word means "river, stream". Although the word does not appear as an element in place-names and is rare in alliterative poetry, it is found occasionally in other thirteenth and fourteenth-century writings and was eventually transposed with several specialized meanings into the English of the United States and New Zealand. Whether it is connected with the south-midland dialect word *flam* "a low marshy place near a river", which the *English Dialect Dictionary* records in Oxfordshire and some neighbouring counties, must remain conjectural.

In *Patience* 310 occurs the stirring line

Alle þe goteȝ of þy guferes and groundeleȝ powleȝ,

which provides the only instance of *gufere* cited by the *Middle English Dictionary*. The word is probably a variant of *golf* "a deep cavity, abyss", which appears in the similar phrase "goteȝ of golf" in *Pearl* 608. In Old French, too, *goufre* is cited as a variant of *golfe*.[2] There are a few occurrences of *golf* outside the alliterative poems, but the topographical senses of "a gulf, bay, or whirlpool" were not common. Neither form is listed in A. H. Smith's *English Place-Name Elements*. There is, however, the interesting link with the northern dialectal *goave* or *goaf*, first discussed by E. V. Gordon and C. T. Onions in connection with the passage in *Pearl*,[3] which, as the *English Dialect Dictionary* records, denotes "the space left in a coal-mine after the whole of the coal has been extracted" in various parts of the north country northwards from Lancashire, as well as "a hollow or depression in the moorland or on a hillside" in west Yorkshire. The *Gawain*-poet's "goteȝ of guferes" in *Patience* and the unceasing "goteȝ of golf" in *Pearl* may well recall the deep river cavities in the Pennine limestone country, as Gordon and Onions suggest, with which the poet was very likely familiar. To this day, some of the rivers in the Peak district disappear underground for considerable stretches, to reappear as "goteȝ of guferes", rushing currents of water, out of the depths. The river Manifold, for example, in north-eastern Staffordshire, disappears beneath Darfur Crags, to surge forth again in the grounds of Ilam Hall, some 8 km downstream. One of its tributaries, the Hamps, similarly runs underground for part of its course. It

2. R. Grandsaignes d'Hauterive, *Dictionnaire d'Ancien Français* (Paris, 1947) s.v. *goufre*.
3. See *Medium Aevum* 2 (1933) 176, and the note to lines 607-8 in Gordon's edition of *Pearl*.

appears that we have here a local phenomenon which provided both the image and a rare topographical word for the *Gawain*-poet.

The third of the rare words listed earlier, *rake*, goes back to Old English *racu* "course, path". As the meaning "path" is well attested in various dialects, in place-names, and occasionally in literature, the word is usually given this sense by editors of alliterative poems. It is thus glossed for its two occurrences in *Morte Arthure* 1525, 2985, and two in *The Wars of Alexander* 3383, 5070. Elsewhere in alliterative poetry the word occurs only twice within fifteen lines in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2144, 2160) where it describes the steep downward descent into the valley of the Green Chapel. When the knight reaches the bottom reference is made to "þe brymme", *the* stream, although none has been mentioned before, unless indeed we take *rake* here to mean "watercourse, stream", a sense confirmed by Old English usage where the compounds *ēa-racu* and *strēam-racu* point to such semantic development. This is further borne out by the meaning "reach, the straight stretch of a river", found in place-names (AHS II, 78), and it is perhaps worth recording that for Mr Colin Garner, my Cheshire informant, *rake* has a sufficiently similar meaning to elicit the response: "You get it on farms, same as Burgess's rake. I'd got it in my mind it froze over." It is not merely semantically possible but contextually probable that *rake* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* represents another uncommon word for "stream".

bekke, borne

The remaining words which denote "a river, stream" in alliterative poetry can be associated even more firmly with midland and northern dialects than the two just discussed. A notable exception is *bekke*, from Old Norse *bekkr*, which, according to A. H. Smith (I, 26), replaced Old English *brōc* "brook" and *burna* "burn" in much of the north country and the Danelaw, but which does not figure in alliterative poetry, where *borne* continues to be used. On the other hand, in the north country, as Smith also notes (I, 63) the introduction of Old Norse *brunnr* reinforced the use of Old English *burna*, so that the continuing use of *borne* in alliterative poetry, as well as in non-alliterative poems, is not surprising. The *Gawain*-poet uses the word in all four poems, to denote streams in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*, and the sea and the Flood respectively in *Patience* and *Cleanness*. The word occurs several times in both *The Destruction of Troy* and *The Wars of Alexander*. It

is recorded, for example, from fourteenth-century Worcester-shire, where Langland also knew it, in the personal name "Joh. atte Bourn",[4] and is found in such north-west midland place-names as Ashbourne in Derbyshire.

gille, gole

The northern and north-midland *gille* occurs northwards from Derbyshire and Lancashire with the sense of "a deep and narrow valley, a ravine", usually with wooded banks and a stream running at the bottom. The word connoted the presence of a stream in Old Norse and the connotation appears to have survived in Middle English, patently so when re-inforced by "stream" in the compound *gill-stremes* found in *The Wars of Alexander*, where the Ashmole manuscript reads at line 3231

Girdid out as gutars in grete gill-stremes,

a better reading than the *gylle-stormez* of the Dublin manu-script. In *The Awntyrs off Arthure* the word *gylles* is used once (418) as a convenient rhyme word in the not particu-larly informative phrase "greues and gylles", and it also occurs occasionally in non-alliterative works.

The word *gole*, still known in north-east Cheshire with the meaning "ditch" and found in neighbouring Derbyshire in the place-name Watergo (cp. the sixteenth-century form Watergawle), south-west of Derby, is probably of native origin, although possibly influenced in form by the Old French *goule* "throat" from which the *Middle English Diction-ary* derives it. The meaning of "watercourse", more specifi-cally "a ditch, channel, stream" is well attested in place-names and dialect in the north, in several midland counties, and in the south-west of England, and in its nonce occurrence in *Morte Arthure* 3725 the same meaning is appropriate.

gote, goter

Not far from Three Shire Heads, at the heart of the "real" *Gawain* country, where Cheshire, Staffordshire, and Derbyshire adjoin, are the headwaters of the river Goyt which eventually joins with the Etherow to form the river Mersey. Although some early forms of the name suggest a Celtic origin, others point to an Old English **gota*, related to the verb *gēotan* "to pour, flow", as the origin of the

4. See M. T. Löfvenberg, *Studies on Middle English Local Surnames*, pp. 20 f. Cp. also K. Cameron, *English Place-Names*, pp. 162 ff.

river-name as well as of Middle English *gote*. This word occurs in *Cleanness* 413 and *The Wars of Alexander* 4796 with the meaning "a watercourse, a stream", as well as in the phrases "gotez of . . . guferes" and "gotez of golf" in *Patience* and *Pearl* which we noted earlier. The word is known to my Cheshire informant and is recorded in several north-country, midland, and south-western dialects by the *English Dialect Dictionary*. Although not confined to the "real" *Gawain* country of the north-west midlands, it formed part of its dialect, and indeed still does, and also figures there in such minor names as Lightgote in Derbyshire. Its occur-rence in several alliterative poems, particularly those of the *Gawain*-poet, may thus be regarded as reflecting regional usage.

Even more common in the local toponymy of the "real" *Gawain* country is the dialectal "gutter" which denotes both "a drain, channel, a narrow watercourse" and "a small stream" and is known as such to my Cheshire informant. Of Old French origin, probably via Anglo-Norman *gotere* and possibly influenced by Middle English *gote*, the word *goter* is represented in such minor names as Tinkerspit Gutter, head-water of the Cheshire river Dane, in the parish of Wildboarclough, in such Staffordshire moorland names as Green Gutter Head and Lower Stoke Gutter on Goldsitch Moss, and in the simple name Gutter in Hartington Upper Quarter parish near Buxton in north-west Derbyshire. The word is used by several alliterative poets and occasionally else-where. In *The Siege of Jerusalem* it occurs alongside the distinctive midland word *baches* "valleys" in a couplet re-dolent of reminiscences of gushing streams:

Baches woxen ablode a-boute in þe vale,
And goutes fram gold wede as goteres þey runne.
(*Siege Jer* 559-60)

In Book V (1607) of *The Destruction of Troy*, the river Xanthus is described as running under the city "through Godardys and other grete vautes", where *godardys* is a variant of *goteres* and denotes water channels used, *inter alia*, to turn mill wheels. The form in *The Wars of Alexander* is *gutars* in 3231, and *guttars* in 4796 where it is linked with *gotis*, which we discussed above. In the latter instance the meaning is practically that of the modern English "gutter", whereas in line 3231 it means "streams" or even "torrents". Despite its appearance in such exotic narrative surroundings, the word *goter* provides yet another example of a topographical word with which several of the alliterative poets were familiar from local usage.

rasse, rẹs(se)

Old Norse *rás* "a rush of water, a water-channel" survives in Middle English as well as in modern English "mill race", perhaps reinforced by French *ras, raz* "strong current", and is more likely to be the root of the word *rasse* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1570 than Old French *ras* "level (ground)" which causes most editors and translators to render the word as "bank or ledge" in the poem, a meaning more appropriate in *Cleanness* 446. The "hole" to which the boar retreats in this episode of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not a cave in the hillside, but an opening up or widening of the water-course in which the "boerne" runs among steep banks, and in which the hunted animal scrapes desperately before succumbing to Sir Bertilak in mid-stream. The word occurs in late minor names according to A.H. Smith (II, 81), as in the Yorkshire Gipsey Race.

Cognate with Old Norse *rás* is Old English *rǣs* "race, rush, onslaught" which occurs as *res(se)* in several alliterative poems. In *Pearl* 874 the word is used to reinforce the image of rushing waters,

Lyk flodeȝ fele laden runnen on resse,

which A. C. Cawley renders "like many rivers rushing in full spate",[5] and which evokes a picture very similar to the poet's description in the boar hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Usage in the alliterative poems suggests that the several related meanings of Old Norse *rás*, Old English *rǣs*, and Old French *ras* (which is also glossed "fossé plein d'eau") tended to conflate in Middle English. Thus, for example, in *The Wars of Alexander* 1996 the phrase "redis in a rese" means "reads in a hurry", but the word may well have suggested itself to the poet by the reference to "þe streme of struma" in the preceding line.

rynel, stanc

Confronted with the word "runnel" my Cheshire informant offered this response: "I know 'rundle'. That's water going under a road, same as a splash or a ford covered over." The earlier forms, without intrusive *d*, derive from the Old English pair *rynel* (masculine) and *rynele* or *rinnelle* (feminine). Later English has the several forms "runnel",

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5. *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. A. C. Cawley and J. J. Anderson, (London, 1976), p. 35.

"rundle", and "rindle", all meaning "a small stream, rivulet". *The English Dialect Dictionary* assigns both "runnel" and "rindle" to the midlands and north country, including Staffordshire and neighbouring counties, while D. Wilson narrows the Staffordshire usage of "rindle" even further, to the moorlands.[6]

Among the poets of the alliterative revival only the poet of *The Destruction of Troy* appears to use the word *rynel*, and he associated it, perhaps mainly for reasons of alliteration, with "red" blood. In line 5709 the word has its literal meaning of "a small stream", here used to denote the rivulets running with the blood of the wounded and slain in the battle following the landing of the Greeks in Book XIV:

The rynels wex red of the ronke blode.

The same picture is transformed into the image of "Rinels of red blode" running down Hector's cheeks in the other occurrence of the word, in Book XVII, 7506. Both the literal and the figurative usage confirm familiarity with a word associated mainly with the north and the north midlands.

The same poet employs another "water"-word of limited literary occurrence, *stanc* "a pond, pool", from Old French *estanc*, to describe the pool into which the Greeks cast the body of Penthesilea in Book XXVIII. The reference to a pond or reservoir,

A stanke full of stynke standyng besyde,
(*Destr Troy* 11189)

at first sight seems to conflict with the description of it as "a clere terne" two lines earlier, but *clere* here means "calm, unruffled", perhaps even "torpid". Chaucer uses *clere* similarly to render Latin *serēnus* in describing the sea in *Boece* II, metrum 3, 13. The inconsistency is rather in equating *stanke* and *terne*, both meaning "pond" or "pool" with *burne* in 11472, which denotes flowing water. But the latter reference is at some remove from the earlier ones and *burne* appears to have been chosen for alliteration at the expense of topographical consistency.

The *Gawain*-poet uses *stanc* twice in *Cleanness*, in one instance opting for the same association of the word with "stink" as in *The Destruction of Troy*, which might suggest not merely an alliterative convenience or a false etymologi-

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6. *Staffordshire Dialect Words. A Historical Survey* (Buxton and Stafford, 1974) p. 53.

cal linking but an actual awareness of the odour emanating from stagnant pools:

> As a stynkande stanc þat stryed synne.
> (*Cleanness* 1018)

Towards the end of the description of the Flood earlier in the poem God is shown turning off the waters:

> þen he stac vp þe stangeȝ, stoped þe welleȝ,
> (*Cleanness* 439)

which in view of the Latin *cataractae coeli* of *Genesis* viii, 2, Anderson glosses "floodgates, cataracts". These are proper renderings of the Latin word, but they have different meanings in English. In the present instance, the sense of "waterfall" is inappropriate, as the word *stangeȝ* connotes "reservoirs" which are here blocked or dammed up to stop the flow of water, a sense more in accord with the word's usual meaning of "pond, pool". The latter is confirmed by three occurrences in *The Wars of Alexander* as well as by place-names in Herefordshire, Lancashire, and north Yorkshire (AHS II, 146). In dialect the word had wider currency, and it is found in Middle English writings other than alliterative poetry. Chaucer uses it once, to describe the lake in hell into which, according to *Revelation* xxi, 8, adulterers will be cast: "Seint John seith that avowtiers shullen been in helle, in a stank brennynge of fyr and of brymston" (*The Parson's Tale* 840). In Cheshire, although the corresponding verb is listed in the phrase "stanking a drain", that is damming it up, in Egerton Leigh's *Glossary*,[7] the word has not survived into the dialect of my informant from Alderley Edge.

strynde, terne

In the valley of the Cheshire-Derbyshire river Goyt, which was mentioned earlier, the place-name Strines in High Peak hundred reveals in its earlier forms Stryndes, Strindes the Middle English *strynde* used by the *Gawain*-poet in *Patience* 311:

> And þy stryuande stremeȝ of stryndeȝ so mony.

The word is of uncertain, but probably Old English,

7. Egerton Leigh, *A Glossary of Words used in the Dialect of Cheshire* (London and Chester, 1877; repr. 1973) s.v. *stank*.

origin, and may be related to *strand*. Its meaning ranges from "a ditch, water-channel" to "stream" and in *Patience* it is best rendered "currents". Although not confined to alliterative poetry it seems largely western and northern in Middle English. The word is also recorded in some minor names in Derbyshire, and the *English Dialect Dictionary* cites examples of usage from Lincolnshire, Shropshire, and Yorkshire, thus confirming it as yet another word with strong regional colouring.

The same is true of the word *terne*, derived from Old Norse *tjǫrn* "a tarn, small lake, pool", which belongs in toponymy and dialect wholly to the north-west, and which in Middle English generally as well as in alliterative poetry is similarly restricted. The poet of *The Destruction of Troy*, as we noted earlier, equates the word with *stanke*, and so does the poet of *The Wars of Alexander* whose *staunke* is also called a *terne* (3860). *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, as the full title indicates, takes place "at the Terne Wathelyn", Tarn Wadling, a small lake south of Carlisle, drained in the nineteenth century, which is also the setting of three other surviving romances.[8] The *Gawain*-poet uses the word but once, perhaps for alliteration, in *Cleanness* 1041:

> And þer ar tres by þat terne of traytoures,

thereby illustrating yet again his familiarity with a topographical term associated with the north-west of the country.

see, occiane, fome, bre

There is a small group of words used by alliterative poets which denote inland lakes or ponds, occasionally streams, but which are used on occasions to refer to the sea. Some "sea"-words in Middle English, developed straight from Old English or Old Norse, were common and familiar, like *see* "sea" itself. But a word like *occiane* "ocean" was still sufficiently uncommon and learned a word for Chaucer to restrict it to his "wise" Man of Law, apart from its being used once in his *Boece*. It is equally uncommon in alliterative poetry, where it occurs in *The Wars of Alexander* 2328, 5503, in *Morte Arthure* 31, and in *Alexander and Dindimus* 533. The poet of *The Destruction of Troy* uses the word twice as an adjective in the phrase "the se occiane" (4440, 13254).

The same poet uses *fome* "foam", from Old English *fām*, several times for "sea", as does the poet of *Alexander and*

8. See *ed. cit.*, pp. 32 ff.

Dindimus who twice alliterates it with "fish". This use of "foam", also attested in non-alliterative Middle English, is familiar from its later appearance in the line "To Norroway o'er the faem" in the ballad *Sir Patrick Spens*.

Rather more idiosyncratic is the word *bre*, which normally denotes various liquids, such as "broth, soup, juice" and even a kind of ale, but which appears twice in *The Destruction of Troy* meaning "sea" (3697, 12516). Mr Colin Garner's response to "brew" was "slang for brook". The word, at least in its topographical sense, looks like an inland dialect word used by the poet of *The Destruction of Troy* as a synonym for "sea" for purposes of alliteration.

flode, brymme, laye

The ubiquitous word *flode* "flood" (like *water*) could describe anything from a stream to the ocean, a semantic range inherited from Old English *flōd*, and well illustrated by the various uses to which the *Gawain*-poet puts the word in his four poems. Similarly the Old English poetic word *brim* has several uses in Middle English. Originally either "sea, flood, water" or "the edge of the sea, shore", Middle English *brymme* can denote any body of water, from a spring to the sea. The alliterative poets used it as a rule more specifically to mean either "stream", as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2172 and *The Wars of Alexander* 4080, or "bank, brink", as in *Cleanness* 365 and *Pearl* 232, 1074.

An interesting development is that of Old English *lagu* "water" which generally referred to the sea in Old English poetry. Its Middle English descendant *laye* has the more restricted meaning "lake, pond". Yet in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, where Arthur with his ships "lengede one laye" (3721), the word again means "sea". According to A.H. Smith (II, 12), the element appears in the Devon place-name Slapton Ley, a large lake, and in East Anglia, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word was recorded in the nineteenth century with the meaning of "a very large pond". Closer to the "real" *Gawain* country of the north-west midlands is the still current sense of "a stretch of water, not running" in the east Cheshire dialect of Mr Colin Garner. The fourteenth-century name of a Cheshire fishery in the river Weaver, le Lowe, is derived by Dodgson from the same root, but "confused with *hlāw*".[9]

abyme, hourle, loghe

Mr Garner responded unhesitatingly with "Yes; deep

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9. *The Place-Names of Cheshire*, Part II, p. 115.

water" to the word *abyme* "abyss, depths (of sea or earth)", which is not common in the sense "sea" in alliterative poetry. In the description of the Flood in *Cleanness* 363, it may have been suggested by the Latin use of *abyssus* in the Vulgate (*Genesis* vii, 11), as Anderson surmises in his edition. That the word could specifically mean "sea" to the poet is clear from *Patience* 318, where it is preceded by the phrase "I am wrapped in water" in the previous line and followed by the line

þe pure poplande hourle playes on my heued, (*Pat* 319)

which uses another rare "water"-word, *hourle*. Jonah is crying to God from the depth of the sea, and the whole passage rings with evocative "sea"-words.

The word *hourle* probably derives from the verb *hurlen* "to rush" which was commonly associated with surging water. The above line from *Patience* is repeated almost *verbatim* in the Ashmole manuscript of *The Wars of Alexander* 1154,

þe pure populande hurle passis it vmby,

where *hurle* denotes the surge of the sea. In the Dublin manuscript of *The Wars of Alexander* another verbal derivative of similar meaning, *perle*, expresses the same idea of a rush or surge of water.

Finally, it is worth noting that the *Gawain*-poet's *loghe* appears to have been yet another inland "water"-word, which here provides a useful alliterative synonym for "sea" both in *Patience* 230 and in its three occurrences in *Cleanness*. Of Celtic origin the northern Old English *luh*, meaning "loch, lake, pond", is found in its Middle English form in this sense in *The Wars of Alexander* 3899 and *The Awntyrs off Arthure* 83, and in some non-alliterative works. Although in place-names this element occurs mainly in the north, it is found as far south as Lincolnshire and may be present in the Derbyshire place-name Loughborne.[10]

flosche, plasche

The topographical affinity of a stretch of water, like a pond or lake, with marshland, that is a tract of land more or less permanently waterlogged, is well illustrated by the Middle English word *flosche*. In place-names, *flosche* (also *flasche*) can mean "a pool" as well as "a swamp", testimony perhaps to the difficulty of differentiating between the two

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10. See Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, p. 741.

in a rainy climate before the days of adequate drainage. The more northerly form *flask* reveals the Scandinavian origin of the word, from Old Danish *flask*, "a swamp, a pool", while the Old French *flache* "a small pool, puddle" may have helped to develop the forms in *s(c)h*, which range from the north country to the midlands.

In alliterative poetry two of the poets use *flosche* to demarcate one side of a narrow passage or restricted terrain, as swamps were obviously considered treacherous, if not impassable. Thus the *Gawain*-poet's

> Bitwene a flosche in þat fryth and a foo cragge,
> (*Gaw* 1430)

where the passage is between a swamp and a forbidding crag, whereas in *Morte Arthure* the other side is a stretch of water proper, "a flode":

> Be-twyx a plasche and a flode, appone a flate lawnde.
> (*Morte Arth* 2798)

Alliteration confirms that the word here must originally have been *flasche*, although another topographical word *plasche* also exists. The latter, which is paralleled in Middle Dutch *plasch*, is probably onomatopoeic in origin. It means "a marshy pool" and occurs in place-names of the south and the west midlands.[11] I have found no examples of *plasche* in alliterative poetry, apart from the doubtful occurrence in *Morte Arthure*. The *Promptorium Parvulorum* equates the two words: "Plasch, or flasch qwere rayne water stondyth . . ."[12]

In both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Morte Arthure* the meaning "swamp, marsh" is appropriate for *flosche*, whereas in *The Wars of Alexander* 2049 the word denotes "pools of blood" in which the horses are wading to their fetlocks:

> þat foles ferd in þe flosches to þe fetelakis.

A similar image is created in the description of the massacre in *The Siege of Jerusalem* which, as we noted earlier, makes use of several interesting "water"-words. Here the

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11. E.g. Plaish in Shropshire, Plash in Somerset, Melplash in Dorset. Löfvenberg (p. 152) cites the thirteenth-century personal name Hugh de Laplache from Somerset.
12. *The Promptorium Parvulorum*, ed. A. L. Mayhew (E.E.T.S., E.S. 102, London, 1908) col. 350.

reference is also to horses wading, this time knee-deep, but *flasches* may be more literally puddles or small pools of water into which runs the blood of men and beasts:

> þe blode fomed hem fro in þe flasches aboute,
> þat kne-depe in þe dale dascheden stedes.
> (*Siege Jer* 571-2)

The *Gawain*-poet's use of a topographical word almost entirely restricted in Middle English literature to these few occurrences is of particular interest in a passage in which several other rare words are employed to describe the terrain of the boar hunt. Here it suffices to note that one of these words is represented in the name Flash, a village in the north-east corner of Staffordshire, in a marshy moorland setting with appropriate echoes of medieval boar hunts.

ker(re), misy

The *Gawain*-poet uses two other words in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to denote swamps which occur nowhere else in alliterative poetry and rarely elsewhere. These are *ker(re)* and *misy*. The first, of Scandinavian origin as in Old Icelandic *kjarr* "brushwood", is common in place-names of the Danelaw (AHS II, 4). The word is still familiar to my Cheshire informant, and it occurs quite frequently in place-names and minor names in north-east Cheshire, north Staffordshire, and north-west Derbyshire, the heartland of the "real" *Gawain* country. There is, for example, the "sow's marsh", Sowcar, in Rainow parish in Macclesfield hundred in Cheshire, or Broad Carr in High Peak hundred, Derbyshire, recorded as "le Soweker" in 1379 and "Brodeker" in 1285 respectively. The *Gawain*-poet's "in a ker syde" (1421) and "at þe kerre syde" (1431) occur close together in the description of the boar hunt and clearly envisage the hunters skirting the marshland. It is worth noting that this is the same passage in which the word *flosche* occurs (1430).

The word *misy* occurs only once in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

> þurȝ mony misy and myre, mon al hym one,
> (*Gaw* 749)

as Sir Gawain rides on his way to keep his tryst. *The Middle English Dictionary* cites no other example, and the word is not listed as a place-name element by A.H. Smith. Probably related to Old English *mēos* "moss" and *mos* "a moss, marsh", *misy* is recorded as *mizzy* in Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* with

the meaning "a bog, quagmire", and is cited as a north country and Lancashire dialect word by the *English Dialect Dictionary*. Egerton Leigh lists the variant "mizzick", meaning "bog", in his Cheshire *Glossary*, but the word is not known to my informant from Alderley Edge, although in neighbouring Bucklow hundred, the most northerly in Cheshire, the word occurs in a number of field names. Related place-name forms to *misy* are those incorporating Old English *mēos*, like Meese in Staffordshire and Shropshire, and the names of two midland rivers: the Mease, which rises in Leicestershire and joins the Trent near Alrewas in Staffordshire, and the Meese, which flows from western Staffordshire into Shropshire.[13] The *Gawain*-poet's *misy* is certainly an uncommon word with strong regional colouring.

myre, mosse, marasse

The word *myre* which the poet links with *misy* is, on the other hand, quite common. Used by the poet also in *Patience* 279 and *Cleanness* 1114, the word occurs in other alliterative poems and elsewhere in Middle English literature. Derived from Old Norse *mýrr* "a mire, bog", the word occurs in place-names mainly in areas of Scandinavian settlement. In Great Longstone parish in the High Peak hundred of Derbyshire, for instance, the minor name The Mires is recorded as "le myre" in a mid-fourteenth-century personal name.

Old Norse *mýrr*, Old English *mēos*, and Old English *mos* are etymologically related. From *mos* derives Middle English *mosse* which can mean "bog, swamp", as well as "moss". Both senses are found in place-names, mainly of the north country and the north-west midlands (AHS II, 43), where it is a common element in the moorlands of the southern Pennines. The word is linked contextually with "misy and myre" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, occurring a few lines earlier:

With roȝe raged mosse rayled aywhere.
(*Gaw* 745)

It means "moss" here, but carries connotations of marshy ground, as mosses thrive in moist soil. This connection is exploited even more closely in *Morte Arthure* where the word is twice used in the alliterative phrase "the mosse and the marrasse" (2014) and "thorowe marasse and mosse" (2505),

13. See E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford, 1960) s.vv. Mease, Meese; and cp. W. H. Duignan, *Notes on Staffordshire Place Names* (London, 1902) p. 101.

where the connotations of marshy terrain are further conveyed by *marasse* "morass, swamp", from Old French *mareis*, found elsewhere in Middle English and in several other alliterative poems, including *Piers Plowman*, but not used by the *Gawain*-poet. Langland uses *mosse* in the description of St. Paul the hermit invisible in his concealment "for mosse and for leues" (*Piers Plowman* B XV 287) where the botanical sense is patent, and the same connotations of concealment are present in line 93 of *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* where a compound "hair-moss" is used:

With hethe and with horemosse hilde it about.

With its connotations of concealment, of mosses growing in moist ground as well as in the cracks of stones and rocks, as in *Mum and the Sothsegger* 1643-5, and of bogs and marshland generally, *mosse* is one of the more versatile "swamp"-words found in alliterative poetry.

mor

In the north of England and, as A. H. Smith notes (II, 42), especially along the Pennines, the word *mor* (Old English *mōr*, Old Norse *mór*) generally denotes "a high tract of barren uncultivated ground", whereas in more low-lying parts as well as in other regions of England it may refer to "marshland". In the alliterative poems, *mor* is frequently made to alliterate with *mountez* as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2080, *Cleanness* 385, *The Destruction of Troy* 7350, 7809, and *The Siege of Jerusalem* 726, while the poet of *William of Palerne* uses both *mor* and *mire* in the same formulaic manner, presumably giving to both the common meaning "marshland", unless indeed the distinction is purely scribal:

ouer mures and muntaynes and many faire pleynes,
(*Wm Pal* 2619)

ouer mires and muntaynes and oþer wicked weiȝes.
(*Wm Pal* 3507)

In the phrase "by the more side" in *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* 495, the reference could be to the marshes then abundant in the vicinity of Glastonbury to which the passage refers. Löfvenberg (pp. 133 ff.) cites *inter alia* the Somerset personal name "Edith de la Morland" from the thirteenth century, and similar surnames and place-names can be found in many other parts of England.

sloh, wose, warþe

Two words which among alliterative poets only Langland uses are *sloh*, Old English *slōh* "a slough, a mire" (*Piers Plowman* C XIII 179),[14] which is found in place-names and minor names from Derbyshire southwards, as in the Derbyshire field-name "le Sloughes" from 1389; and *wose*, Old English *wāse* "mud" (*Piers Plowman* C XIII 229),[15] which occurs in place-names from Warwickshire southwards, and developed into modern English "ooze". The thirteenth-century Oxfordshire surname "Ric. de la Wose" contains this element.

The word *warþe* from Old English *waroð* "shore", used in alliterative poetry apparently only by the *Gawain*-poet in *Patience* 339 and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 715, could be taken to mean "marshland" in the latter instance:

At vche warþe oþer water þer þe wyȝe passed,
(*Gaw* 715)

where a contrast with *water*, that is "stream", is presumably intended, so that the usual glosses "ford" or "river bank" lack conviction.[16] In *Patience* 339, on the other hand, the meaning "shore", attested in toponymy, is appropriate. As the meaning "marshy ground near a stream" appears to attach to some of the place-names containing this element (AHS II, 246), the *Gawain*-poet may well be using the word in the above line in this sense. He is, after all, enumerating the obstacles facing Sir Gawain as he rides through a wintry countryside which contains not only streams but the "mony misy and myre" already considered. In several inland dialects, the word *warth* denotes "a flat meadow, especially one close to a stream", with obvious swampy connotations, in the west midlands and west Yorkshire. In north-east Cheshire and north-west Derbyshire the word occurs in a few minor and field-names, like Warth Cottage in Chinley, Buxworth and Brownside parish, High Peak hundred. It is yet another example of a topographical term connoting marshy terrain used by the *Gawain*-poet that possesses some regional colouring.

*mershe, fen, bog, *wæsse*

Three other words merit brief notice. The word *mershe*

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14. In Skeat's edition, where Pearsall (XII 177) has *sloo*, glossed "earth".
15. In Skeat's edition; Pearsall (XII 228) has the same.
16. Cp. the several editions of the poem, and P. Haworth, "'Warthe' in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'," *Notes and Queries* N.S. 14 (1967) 171-2.

"marsh" itself, from Old English *mersc*, has no specific regional associations. Similarly, *fen*, from Old English *fen(n)*,"a fen, a marsh, marshland", is known in many parts of the country and is found in literature and place-names accordingly. The word occurs in the late Scottish alliterative poem *Rauf Coilȝear* 444, and is used in *The Wars of Alexander* 4358 in the specific sense of "clay" or "mud", itself attested elsewhere in Middle English. My Cheshire informant, interestingly enough, does not know the word.

But he does of course know the word *bog*, cognate with Irish *bogach* "marsh", which is rare in Middle English. The *Middle English Dictionary* cites no literary occurrences of *bog*, and I have found the word only in the Scottish alliterative poem *Golagros and Gawane* 31. A few medieval instances of the word occur in minor names and surnames from Somerset, Worcestershire, and the north country. The word has, however, gained wide currency in more recent times.

It is perhaps worth remembering that one topographical term, most frequently found in the west midlands does not appear to have been used by any alliterative poet. The element **wæsse*, not separately recorded in Old English, is sufficiently attested in West Midland place-names meaning "a wet place, a swamp, a marsh" to be regarded as a Middle English "swamp"-word in its own right. The Staffordshire names Alrewas and Hopwas, the Derbyshire Alderwasley, the Cheshire Woodwas, and the Shropshire Buildwas all contain this word, but I can find no evidence of its use in the dialects of these counties.

The foregoing discussion of "stream"-words and "swamp"-words has sought to provide further evidence of the connection between the more distinctive of such words in Middle English alliterative poetry and the appearance of the same words as elements in place-names of what I have called the "real" *Gawain* country. The exact provenance of most of the alliterative poems will probably never be known for certain, but the works of the *Gawain*-poet at least have been authoritatively assigned on dialectal and graphemic gounds to the region of the southern Pennines centred on Staffordshire, Cheshire, and Derbyshire, where more northerly and more southerly linguistic features overlap.

Such words as *gufere* and *strynde*, and *kerre* and *misy*, and probably *warþe*, can confidently be ascribed to this region. Others, like *goter, rynel*, and *terne*, have somewhat wider regional associations. Of no less interest are several of the words used for "sea" in alliterative poetry, pointing, as in the case of *laye* or *loghe* and perhaps *bre*, to the poets' familiarity rather with mountain streams and pools than with the sea itself. The use of *borne* and *broke* in this
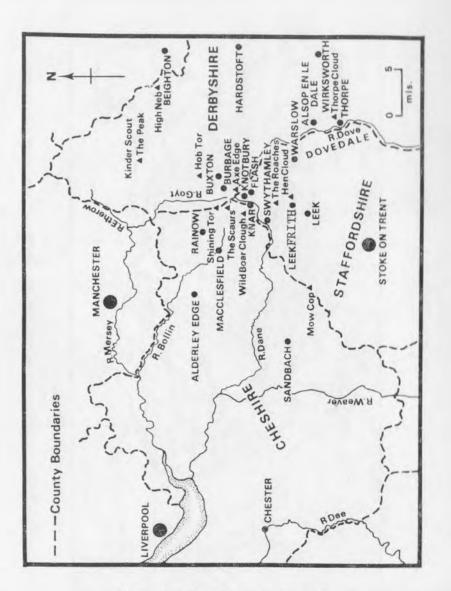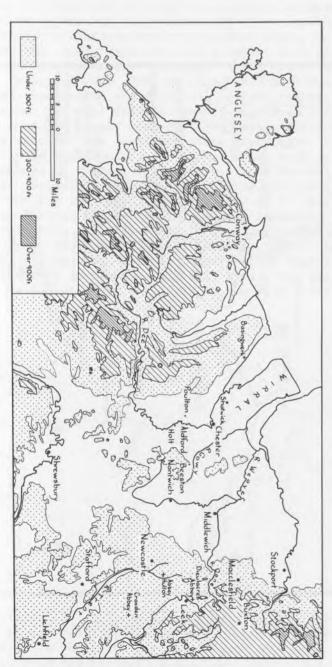
way is characteristic of this tendency.

Although the works of the *Gawain*-poet provide an artistic focus for this and related topographical studies, other alliterative poems are not without effective landscape descriptions and interesting words to express them. *The Wars of Alexander* and *Morte Arthure*, for example, both contribute several noteworthy "water"-words and there are at least two unusual "swamp"-words, *sloh* and *wose*, in *Piers Plowman*. But Langland's landscapes are spiritual regions rather than representative of real English scenery, although some of the words he uses are firmly rooted in the west midland countryside with which he was familiar. Other poets have their feet more firmly on the ground, and where a local word is used in what strikes the reader as somehow a life-like setting to a particular episode, he or she may well be justified in suspecting that the poet's picture owes some of it ingredients, scenic as well as lexical, to a familiar landscape. Nowhere is this feeling stronger than in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for none of the alliterative poets has more successfully imparted to his descriptions impressions of authentic scenes such as we can still visit, for example, in the Goyt valley or along the moors of the Peak District.[17]

MAP 1.
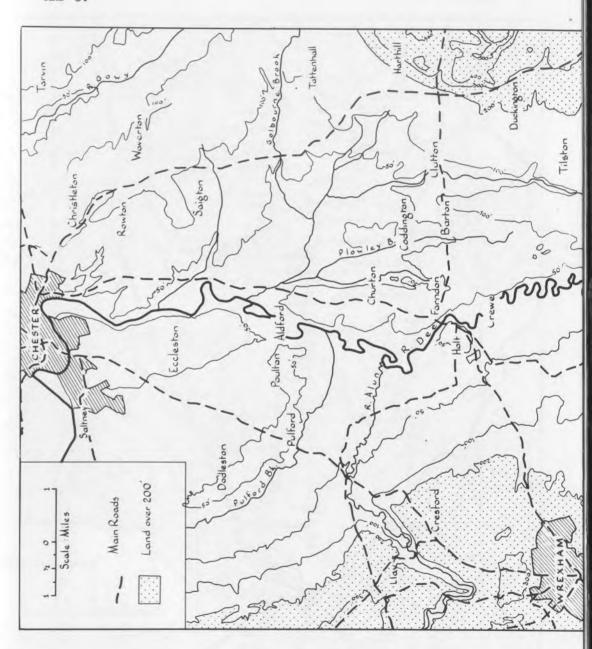
Place-names of "The *Gawain* Country"

2.

MAP 3.
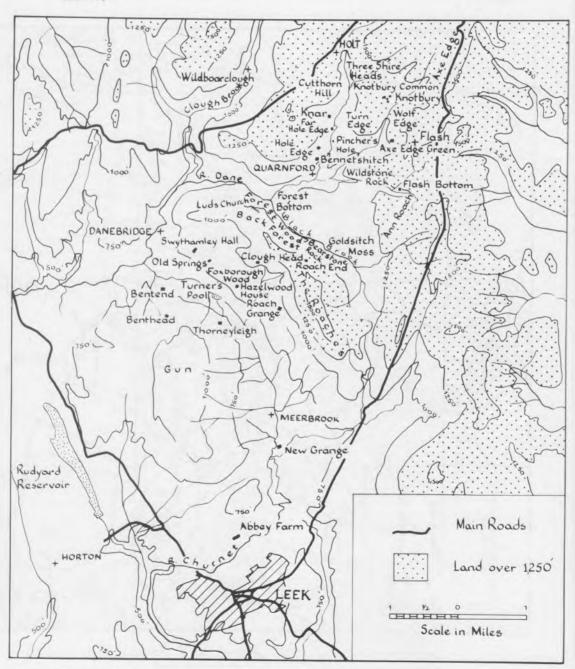
th Wales, Wirral, and Dieulacres
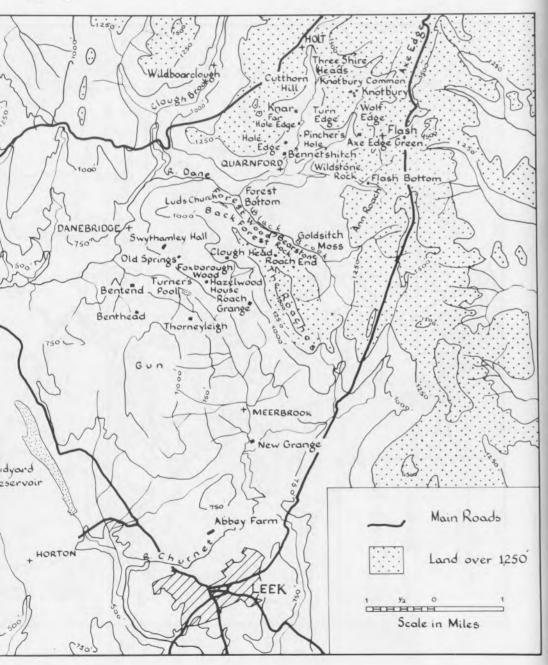
Poulton and the Dee Valley

MAP 4.

MAP 5

The Roaches

Swytha

MAP 4.

MAP 5.

Map 4 labels:

Wildboarclough
Clough Brook
HOLT
Three Shire Heads
Cutthorn Hill
Knotbury Common
Knotbury
Axe Edge
Knar
Far Hole Edge
Turn Edge
Wolf Edge
Flash
Hole Edge
Pincher's Hole
Axe Edge Green
Bennetshitch
QUARNFORD
Wildstone Rock
Flash Bottom
R. Dane
Forest Bottom
Luds Church
Back Forest
Black Wood
Bearstone Rock
Goldsitch Moss
Ann Roach
DANEBRIDGE
Swythamley Hall
Clough Head
Roach End
Old Springs
Foxborough Wood
The Roaches
Turner's Pool
Hazelwood House
Roach Grange
Bentend
Benthead
Thorneyleigh
Gun
MEERBROOK
New Grange
...dyard ...eservoir
Abbey Farm
HORTON
R. Churnet
LEEK

Main Roads

Land over 1250'

1   ½   0   1
Scale in Miles

The Roaches

Map 5 labels:

Goosetree
GRADBACH
Helmesley Wood
South Cliff Rocks
Luds Church Cave
Luds Church Ravine Bottom
Buck Forest
High Forest
Clough Head
Buxton Brow
Whitenstoke
Hanging Stone
Paddock
The Rookery
Rouster
Highbridge
Old Springs
Swythamley Hall
Hillylees
SWYTHAMLEY PARK
Black Dane
Hanginstone Farm
Crabtree Wood
Beards
Bearda Mill Cottage
Homerton
Hill Top
Burntoaky
DANEBRIDGE
Snipe
Mellor-knolls
Boyston

Major Roads
Wood and Parkland
Rough Pasture

Feet   Miles

Swythamley Park and Ludchurch Cave

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INDEX OF PLACES

Contents

Holes and Caves
in the 'Gawain' Country

RALPH W.V. ELLIOTT

Many of the adventures, the quests and battles and marvels, of Middle English alliterative poetry take place in terrain marked by high hills and deep valleys. The *Gawain* country, as it has come to be known, is rich in place-names reflecting topographical features which, in turn, are frequently paralleled in the vocabulary of the alliterative poets. It is only to be expected that in the mountainous parts of the Pennines and of Cumbria there should also be found an interesting assortment of caves and caverns, of dens and holes, fit hiding places not only for wild beasts, but for fugitives as well as for knights in armour seeking safe nocturnal refuge.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the hero sleeps in the open 'mo nyȝtez þen innoghe in naked rokkez' (730), holes and caves are few. The *hole* reached by the hard-pressed boar in lines 1569–71 and the *hole* from which the Green Knight emerges at the Green Chapel (2221) refer to different locations and probably represent quite different topographical features. The Green Chapel itself is a curiously ambivalent piece of terrain, at once cave and crevice, secret and close yet seemingly open to the sky, but 'al watz holȝ inwith' (2812). That the poet was describing a place he knew, and which his audience may also have known, is a thought which has occurred to quite a number of readers and critics of the poem.

Other alliterative poets also show occasionally vivid responses to natural features. It is interesting, for example, that the poet of *Mum and the Sothsegger* should describe the cells of a honeycomb in terms of caves:

> Thayr dwellingz been dyuyded, I do hit on þaire combes,
> And many a queynt caue been cumpassid [wy]-þynne.   (1010–11)

For the poet of *The 'Gest Hystoriale' of the Destruction of Troy*, the passing of winter at the opening of Book IX means floods of melting ice and snow descending into wild valleys and deep into underground caves:

Comyn was by course þat the cold wyntur
Was wastid & went with his wete shoures.
ffrostes were faren, and the fell cold;
The slippond slete slidon of the ground;
fflodys were fallyn into furse vales,
And into caues be course cleufit the erthe.   (4029–34)

In *William of Palerne*, the poet envisages a quarry, recently excavated, such as he might have seen on any West Midlands hillside, with a cave alongside offering refuge to the two fugitives. The cave, like so many others in this story, is necessary for the narrative; the quarry is not, and it does not alliterate. It is a naturalistic bonus:

þei saie a litel hem biside a semliche quarrere,
vnder an heiȝ hel al holwe newe diked;
deliuerli þei hieȝed hem þider for drede out of doute,
& crepten into a caue whanne þei þeder come.   (2232–5)

This poem, telling the story of two young lovers fleeing in various disguises to avoid the girl's having to wed another suitor, introduces numerous hide-outs, which the poet mostly calls *caue* or *hole* or *den*. The first of these words is the most immediately topographical; the second, *hole*, has many other meanings besides the topographical 'cavern, cave, cleft', and is used *inter alia* to denote an animal's lair or burrow as well as to refer to the depths of hell as in the phrase *Helle hole* in *St. Erkenwald* 291 and 307. The word *den* shares some of the topographical and animal connotations but is especially common in alliterative poetry in association with the verb *derken* 'to lie still, to lurk, to hide', and with the adjectives *derne* 'secret' and *derk* 'dark'. The poet of *The Wars of Alexander* produces a most evocative picture of the spelaean dwellings of the Gymnosophists in his line, 'Darke in dennes vndire dounes & in derne holis' (4045); but it is in *William of Palerne* that the various alliterative advantages of the word *den* are most consistently exploited, from the first mention in line 17, 'þe child þan darked in his den dernly him one', throughout the adventures of William and Melior. They 'drow hem to a dern den' in 1792; they 'darke-den þere in þat den al þat day longe' in 1834; they 'darked stille in hire den' in 2543; and 'al þat day in þat den þei darked, & þe niȝt' in 2851.

Occasionally the poets forgo the easy, conventional epithets for others, somewhat more imaginative. In *William of Palerne* the 'dern den' of line 1792 becomes more explicit as 'an huge denne' under a hollow oak tree in the following line; whereas earlier in the poem the comeliness of the abducted boy is contrasted both with the solitude and the hideousness of his surroundings:

Louely lay it along in his lonely denne.   (20)

þat so loueliche lay & wep in þat loþli caue.   (50)

The bleakness of some of these alliterative landscapes, standing as they do in sharp contrast to the sunny May morning daisy meadows of the rhetorical tradition of medieval *descriptio loci*, is frequently underlined by a single well-chosen word. The *Gawain*-poet's 'nobot an olde caue' (2182) may be an alliterative response, but *olde* has connotations for the modern reader reminiscent of Hardy's Egdon Heath. Similarly, there are evocations of age-old wilderness in the description of the dwellings of the Lowly Brahmans in *The Wars of Alexander* 4354, 'Bot duells here in disolatis in dennes & in cauys', where the collocation of desolate regions with the more formulaic dens and caves conveys a powerful image of primitive remoteness.

Alliteration of course demands constant recourse to appropriate synonyms or near-synonyms as well as embellishing adjectives. There is a vivid description of an overgrown landscape littered with ruined buildings in Book XXXV of *The Destruction of Troy*, in which Peleus finds refuge while awaiting the return of Pyrrhus. Holes and caves abound, but here the rare word *clocher*, possibly a variant of the more common *closure* 'enclosure', is put alongside the familiar *cave* and *hole* to create yet another image of almost claustrophobic seclusion:

Romyng on the Roces in the rough bankes,
fforto sport hym a space, er he sped ferre,
Hit happit hym in hast the hoole for to fynd,
Of the cave & the clocher, þere the kyng lay.   (13499–502)

In the only other recorded instance of *clocher*, in *The Wars of Alexander* 5289, the reference is to a locked chamber which requires a key to gain entrance. The connotation of seclusion is the same in both passages.

An interesting dialectal synonym, used only in the latter poem and elsewhere found only in northern place-names, occurs at line 5394 of *The Wars of Alexander*:

& þis þe kyng heris,
Makis he gracis to his goddis & þan þe grofe entres.
Quen he was doun in þe depe he saȝe a dym cloude....   (5393–5)

As Skeat already noted in his edition of the poem, the word *grofe* 'is the regular word for "mine" among the Derbyshire miners', but it is in fact more widely distributed, as the *English Dialect Dictionary* testifies. Of Scandinavian adoption (Old Norse *gróf*), the word has cognates in Gothic *grōba* and Old High German *gruoba*, all with the same meanings 'pit, cave, den'. Modern German *Grube* continues the association with mines and

mining. The Cumberland place-name Petegroves (which has not survived) denoted peat-pits.

Another word of Scandinavian origin used by the same poet is *schurrys*, Old Norse *skúrr* 'a shed'. Again the reference is to the cave-dwelling Gymnosophists: 'And þar þei schewid him in schurrys to schellis & to caues' (4049), in response to Alexander's question whether they did not have houses and homes. The word *schellis* probably also means 'shed' or 'hut' or 'hovel', generally erected for temporary use like 'a shepherd's hut on the summer pastures', as A.H. Smith explains it in his *Place-Name Elements* (s.v. **scela*, 26: 103). It does not appear in Old English but is no doubt to be connected with Old Norse *skáli* 'hut, shed', in turn related to the Scottish and North Country *shieling*, rather than to Old English *scel* 'shell' in the sense of hollows in the ground.

The poets of *The Wars of Alexander*, *St. Erkenwald*, and *Piers Plowman* share the use of the word *spelonk(e)*, *spelunk(e)*, deriving, through Old French, from Latin *spēlunca* 'a cave, cavern' which has its counterpart in Greek. Tiberius had a country seat named Spelunca, which hints at a possible connotative resemblance to Modern German *Spelunke*, a word describing a low tavern! Wyclif used the word for the cave of Machpelah in Genesis 23: 9; it occurs in *Mandeville's Travels* and survived through Caxton's 'spelonke for theues' into the sixteenth century.

In *The Wars of Alexander* 'þis spelonk' in line 5392 is a magic cave. In *St. Erkenwald* the form *spelunke* refers twice (49, 217) to the bishop's tomb, a sense acquired in Medieval Latin, although the original meaning 'cave' clearly survived in the topographical context of other occurrences. In his edition of *St. Erkenwald* Gollancz argued that in line 49 *thre sperle* was a misreading or misunderstanding of the supposed manuscript reading *the speke*, taking his cue from Langland's 'in spekes and spelonkes' in *Piers Plowman* B.xv.275. Ruth Morse, in her recent edition, restores *sperl*, which she glosses 'bars, bolts'. But Langland's 'in spekes and spelonkes' has all the appearance of a conventional alliterative phrase, and Skeat was no doubt correct in explaining *speke* as derived from Latin *specus* 'cave', synonymous with *spēlunca* (*The Vision of William*, II.223, note to B.xv.270). The scribe of Corpus Christi College Oxford MS 201 clearly understood the meaning of the word by substituting *caues* to make it easier for his presumably more 'lewed' audience, even if it did spoil the alliteration.

The roll of holes and caves in the *Gawain* country is topographically extensive, albeit lexically much more modest than the other groups of topographical terms, hills and valleys, woods and forests, streams and swamps, which I have examined elsewhere. But their interest is not dependent on numbers. What emerges from even a brief survey of a small group of topographical terms in a handful of representative poems is the tension felt in

so many of the alliterative landscape descriptions between traditional formulaic diction and observance of rhetorical precepts on the one hand and an undeniably personal response to scenes and seasons on the other.

George Turner makes the perceptive comment that in early English alliterative poetry 'it is theoretically possible ... that an occasional breaking of the rules was felt as stylistic effect by the original hearers of the poem' (68), a reference in this case to those occasional irregularities in alliteration which it is always tempting for a modern editor to 'put right'. Wise words; and the same comment may be applied to the breaking of the rules of rhetorical *descriptio*, the departure from the familiar setting of soothing brooks and singing birds in favour of wild mountain scenery where waterfalls cascade, birds are miserable on bare branches, and secret caves offer shelter to man and beast alike.

Although several of the cave-words examined here are quite commonplace, others undoubtedly helped to add a flavour of exoticism to scenes already imbued with touches of secrecy and strange underworldly creatures and mystery and magic. We now use phrases like 'hell-hole' or 'den of thieves' without the spinal shiver their quondam pictorial impact must have caused to medieval folk, but such words as *grofe* or *spelonke*, which have no modern English equivalents, have even now a connotation of mystery such as must be felt by anyone, speleologist or not, who has ever penetrated into the magic subterranean world of Cheddar or Naracoorte.

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Drudgery, Bludgery, and Fudgery
Lexicography for Editors of
Middle English Texts

T.L. BURTON

The drudgery of glossary-making—the selection of words to be glossed, the entering of them on index cards, the arrangement of forms within an entry, the recording of the appropriate line references, the accompanying groans—all this is too well known to need comment here; and it would in any case be an impertinence, in a book dedicated to the honour of a lexicographer who has prepared several dictionaries, to complain of the labour involved in the compilation of a glossary for a single medieval text. It is of the pitfalls of such an exercise rather than of its arduousness that I wish to speak.

The text in question, *Sidrak and Bokkus*, is a late Middle English verse translation of an Old French prose encyclopedia cast in question and answer form—a medieval 'one thousand and one questions you always wanted to ask'. Its remarkable contemporary popularity is shown by the number and distribution of surviving manuscripts in several European vernaculars (over thirty in French; seven and various fragments in English;[1] others in Italian, Danish, and Dutch); its supposed authority by the subtitle found in several of the French versions, 'La fontaine de toutes sciences'. It is a work of some importance in the history of Western thought, providing evidence of the interests, attitudes, and beliefs of the average person (if such a being ever exists) of the later Middle Ages on subjects as diverse as theology (Has God always existed? Why did he not make man incapable of sin?); cosmology (Why is the earth round? How is it held in position?); zoology (What are the most intelligent animals? The longest-lived? Why are dogs so tightly joined during copulation?); meteorology (How can it be cold in fair weather? What is the cause of thunder?); medicine (What is the cause of leprosy? Can it be cured? How can one remove a bone stuck in the throat?); social mores (How frequently should one visit one's friends?); the status and treatment of women (Should a man rebuke his wife in public? How should he behave when he catches her *in flagrante delicto*?); and so on. In spite of this obvious importance there is no modern critical edition

A Companion to the *Gawain*-Poet

Edited by
Derek Brewer and
Jonathan Gibson

D. S. BREWER

6
The Materials of Culture

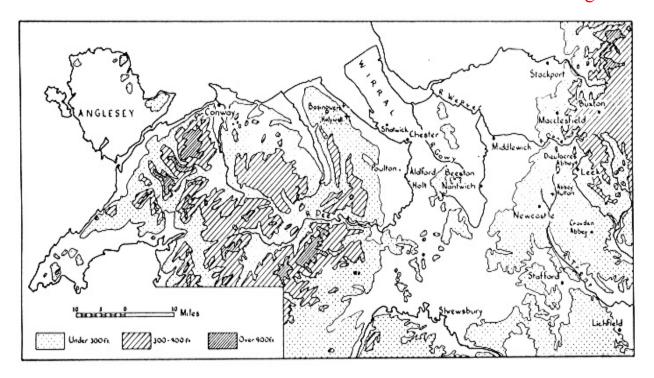Landscape and Geography

Ralph Elliott

When Gawain sets out from Camelot in early November on his 'anious uyage' (535), he journeys at first through the nondescript regions of romance familiar from other tales of Arthurian adventure 'bi frythez and dounez' (695), where hostile creatures confront him. He fights with wolves and dragons, bears and boars, giants and *wodwos*, strange denizens of forests and high fells.

But unlike the accustomed spring or summer landscapes, Gawain's is a cold, inhospitable, wintry one, where snow and sleet, naked rocks and freezing streams prove more perilous than any living antagonists. Admittedly, travelling in November in medieval times was generally confined to important missions and accompanied by considerable hardship (Stokes and Scattergood 1984, 78), but in departing from the familiar landscapes of Arthurian romance, the poet deliberately added a fresh dimension to his narrative. For at a certain point the landscape of wintry hazards in 'contrayez straunge' (713), with its waterfalls heavy with icicles and its birds piping piteously for pain of the cold, changes as the features of Gawain's journey become 'individualised and sharply focussed' (Boitani 1982, 63), and the formulae of conventional *descriptio loci* are replaced by closely observed topographical details described in words drawn from the poet's own northwest Midland dialect.

From the moment Gawain enters 'bi a mounte' into the deep forest of lines 740ff., the reader, or listener, can visualize the scene with surprising clarity: the deep valley with its tangle of oaks, hazel, and hawthorn, lined by hills on either side, and ' roȝe raged mosse rayled

aywhere' (745). The word *raged*, glossed 'ragged, shaggy' by Tolkien and Gordon, is in fact a dialect word meaning 'covered with rime, hoarfrosted', a highly evocative word in the wintry context. And underfoot is the marshy terrain of 'misy and myre' (749), where *misy* is another striking dialect word, unique in Middle English. What Sarah Stanbury has perceptively called the poet's 'consistent adoption of a visual poetic as a pervasive mode of thought' (Stanbury 1991b, 127) is considerably enhanced by his choice of rare topographical words which add what we may call local authenticity to the scenes he describes. Stanbury does not mention this aspect, but its significance should not be underrated.

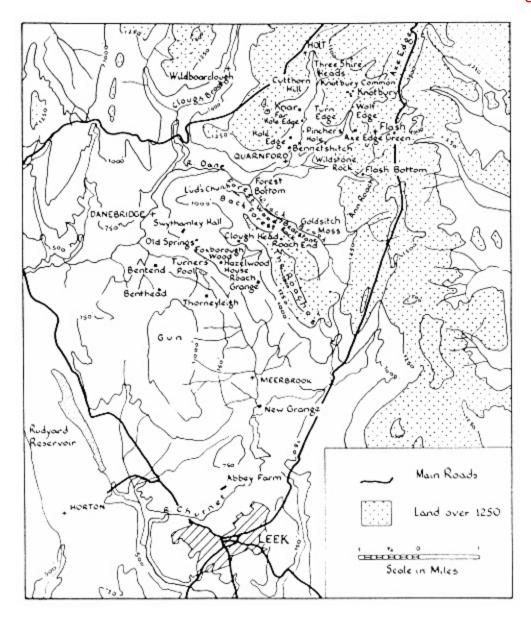The *Gawain* Country
(shows N. Wales and the Wirral)

The poet's attention to details, his highlighting of significant features, his acts of 'poynting', to use a term employed by both Chaucer and by the *Gawain*-poet in line 1009 (cf. Burrow 1971, 69ff.), serve important narrative purposes. They direct attention to the symbolic import of the scenes described: the entanglement of the forest mirrors Gawain's ensnarement in the beheading compact and anticipates the amorous temptations that lie ahead; the miry terrain suggests insecurity, moral frailty, 'vntrawþe'. Moreover, the poet's pinpointing of closely visualized features of landscape, particularly with the aid of local words like *misy* and others yet to be mentioned, also serves to alert his audience to specific locales, actual places familiar to himself and, we may assume, to his audience also.

It is worth noting that only one stanza of more generalized description of mountains and streams, of hostile encounters and freezing nights, separates Gawain's entry into the *forest* of line 741, a word describing an area subject to special jurisdiction, set aside for the preservation and hunting of game, from his earlier arrival in the clearly identified region of North Wales and Wirral. The latter had been a *forest*, but is now called a *wyldrenesse*. The poet uses the word *forest* only once more, appropriately when referring to the locale of the deer hunt (1149).

The landscape descriptions that follow the knight's journey through the wintry, hoar-frosted forest display the same attention to detail, the same 'poynting', already noted. The sudden appearance of Bertilak's castle provides ample illustration. Our concern here is not with the architectural details of Castle Hautdesert, but with its location in a topographical setting embracing the forest of the three

hunting scenes and the Green Chapel itself, the focal point of the whole adventure.

There is something ambiguous about the topography of Bertilak's castle, as if the poet were hinting at its dual role in the narrative. Unless he is choosing words for mere alliterative convenience, which is not his usual style, we may well be justified in attaching deeper significance to his choice of particular descriptive words. The castle is set in an open space within the forest ('abof a launde', 765, 'pyched on a prayere', 768), on rising ground ('on a lawe', 765) a haven welcoming the weary traveller in answer to his prayer. At the same time it is 'loken vnder boȝez' (765), closed in by the boughs of massive trees, suggesting concealment and possible danger (cf. Cockcroft 1978, 465). That the poet is happily punning on the *prayere* of 759 and the *prayere* of 768 is another indication of the rich texture of his vocabulary.

The forest surrounding Hautdesert, the hills and valleys, bogs, and tangled brush, streams and rocky outcrops, all contribute distinctive scenes to each of the three hunts. The parallelism between Bertilak's sport in the open country and his wife's sport in Gawain's close bedroom has often been commented upon; in the present context it is the remarkable congruence between the animals hunted deer, boar, and fox and the territory of each hunt that adds further moment to the poet's consummate artistry

The *Gawain* Country
(shows parts of Cheshire, Staffs and Derbyshire)

in combining close visual observation of landscape with, in this case, the realism as well as the symbolism of the chase.
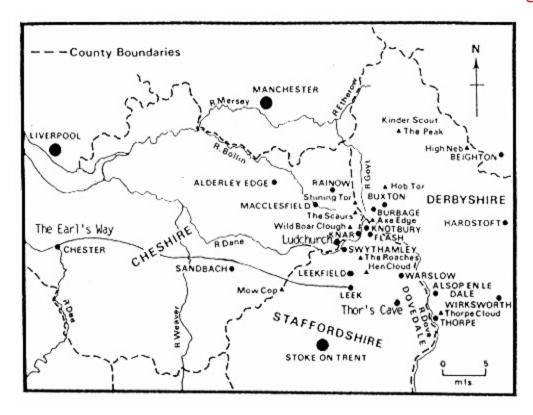
The deer hunt of the first day is impressionistic rather than sharply focused. Here it is the movement of entire herds that is sketched, while the landscapes of largely nondescript *bonkkez* and *klyffes* alternate with equally nondescript *holtez* and *heþe* and 'depe sladez' (1159). It is the ear rather than the eye that is being targeted by rapid motion and striking sound effects, bugles blowing, hounds baying, horns and shouts echoing as if 'klyffes haden brusten' (1166). Yet it is worth noting that the poet's repeated use of the definite article seems to indicate specific features, while the pointedly demonstrative 'þat forest' of line 1149 is a reminder that all this action is taking place in the demesne of Hautdesert.

On the second day the hunt opens beneath an escarpment, the *rocherez* of line 1427, an unusual word repeated at the start of the fox hunt (1698), possibly the same landmark as those bursting 'klyffes'. The landscape of the boar hunt is sharply visualized. Individual landmarks are pinpointed: 'þe rogh rocher' (1432), 'þe knarre' (1434), 'þe knot' (1434), 'þe boerne' (1570). Unusual topographical words appear: *kerre, flosche, knarre, knot, rasse*. That all these words figure on the map of what was most likely the poet's own home ground reinforces the impression that he was drawing on familiar scenes in the creation of his narrative.

The third day's hunting terrain brilliantly mirrors the fox's darting and dodging, turning and twisting as he is glimpsed but for a moment in the brush, along a hedge, leaping across a thicket of thorns (*spenne*, 1709), creeping stealthily along the edge of marshy scrub (*strothe*, 1710), until confronted by three hunters in a narrow

passage through the undergrowth (*þrich*, 1713), before heading back 'to þe wod' (1718). The words *spenne*, *strothe*, and *þrich* are also part of the poet's distinctive vocabulary, here employed to multiply the obstacles facing the fox trying to elude his pursuers in terrain such as is here described. For a discussion of these and other topographical words in the poem see Elliott 1984.

The hunting scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (henceforward *Gawain*) illustrate admirably what has been called the poet's 'technique of moving repeatedly from the general to the particular . . . in his descriptions of space' (Stanbury 1991b, 3). Of the other poems in the Cotton manuscript it is *Pearl* which is closest to *Gawain* in employing this technique of landscape description, aptly described as cinematographic (Renoir 1958, 127). The transition from the closely visualized *erber* in the opening of *Pearl* to the magnificent scenery of the dream landscape has its parallels in the hunting passages in *Gawain*, with their shifting focus from sweeping terrain to a single conspicuous 'rogh rocher vnrydely . . . fallen' (1432), or 'a hole . . . of a rasse bi a rokk þer rennez þe boerne' (156970), or 'a littel dich' (1709).

The Heart of the *Gawain* Country (shows area near Leek)

In *Pearl* the poet's journey leads from the narrow enclosure of his aromatic *erber* (38) into a dream world of spectacular colours where trees have blue trunks, their leaves shimmering silver. But the landscape, however surreal, is still composed of familiar topographical features called by familiar names, the same, often unusual, words as in *Gawain*. But whereas in *Gawain* it is places that are specifically mentioned, in *Pearl* it is the season, 'in Augoste in a ʰʸ³ seysoun' (39), which Derek Brewer has convincingly identified with the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on 15 August, an appropriate day to commemorate a child's entering into the blessed state of becoming a Bride of Christ (Brewer 1983, 166). And is it, one may wonder, a mere coincidence that in August 1380 John of Gaunt, patron of

poets, Chaucer among them, the leading nobleman of his day with vast possessions in the north-west Midlands, chose the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin as the day for the annual gathering of his minstrels at his Staffordshire castle of Tutbury?

The poet's dream takes him into a landscape of *klyfeȝ*, *rokkeȝ*, *downeȝ*

towards a forest and a river filled with precious stones gleaming like stars 'in wynter nyȝt (116) when country folk, *strope-men* (literally 'dwellers in marshy land growing with brushwood', cf. *Gawain* 1710), are asleep. The poet's brief vision of a bright starry winter's night in a landscape of hills and water and woodland is a memorable counterpoint to Gawain's trudging through the frozen forest leading to Hautdesert.

The complex metrical structure of *Pearl* tends to favour topographical formulae and enumeration more in the manner of traditional *descriptio loci* rather than the specific focusing which characterizes the landscapes in *Gawain*. Hence such lines in *Pearl* as 'And raweȝ and randeȝ and rych reuereȝ (105) or 'Of wod and water and wlonk playneȝ (122), and formulae like 'of doun and daleȝ (121), 'by slente oþer slade' (141), 'by stok oþer ston' (380). The effect of this technique is to underline the sheer exuberance of the *adubbement*, the overpowering splendour of the landscape traversed by the poet in his dream pilgrimage, and of the heavenly city, 'þat schyrrer þen sunne wyth schafteȝ schon' (982). It is worth noting that the *Pearl* dreamer *blusched*, 'gazed' (980) at the celestial 'burghe' on its hill, much as Gawain *blusched* at castle Hautdesert suddenly appearing before his eyes. The word is a favourite with the *Gawain*-poet; it occurs in all four poems in the manuscript, reinforcing his, or his characters', particular habit of close visual observation.

In *Cleanness* and *Patience* landscapes are less central to the action than in *Gawain* or *Pearl*. Yet, when opportunity offers, as in the description of the Flood (*Cleanness* 361 ff.), the temptation to describe the waters as engulfing ' hyȝe hylleȝ mountayneȝ on mor', and all
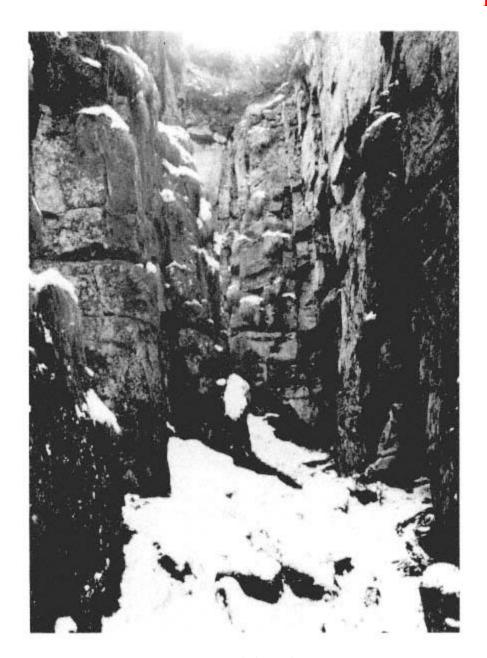
the wild beasts of the woodlands, is not resisted. The result is a striking transformation of an English landscape into the setting of a familiar biblical story, graphically visualized until Noah's Ark finally 'on a rasse of a rok hit rest at þe laste' (*Cleanness* 446).

Even in *Patience*, least topographical of the four poems, there is a moment when the poet's eye discerns features in the sea recalling familiar scenes in a recognizable landscape. Thus he focuses on the whale as

> he swengeȝ and swayues to þe se boþem,
> Bi mony rokkeȝ ful roȝe and rydelande strondes,
> (*Patience* 2534)

closely paralleling the hunters in *Gawain* who 'sweyed togeder' (1429) before the boar 'swenged out þere' (1439) in a landscape studded with rocks and marshes. Even while depicting the depth of the ocean, the poet's art draws strikingly on his vision of familiar England landscapes.

Not two miles from castle Hautdesert lies the goal of Gawain's quest, the Green Chapel, 'in spenne', as Bertilak puts it (1074), a tag which connotes something of the wild, thorny scenery awaiting Gawain. This is no building, however, but a place so weird that Derek Brewer expressed convincingly

In Ludchurch

what others too have felt when reading the poem: 'Whatever it is, the poet is not making up something out of his head. There is just that mixture of vagueness and detailed description which is to be expected when a man describes something which he expects his audience easily to recognize' (Brewer 1948, 13).

Following the Guide's directions in lines 214448, Gawain descends into a valley, where his bewilderment is nicely portrayed as he surveys a scene of natural wilderness with high banks above, a cascading stream at the bottom of 'þe brem valay' (2145), and reaching skyward a group of ᚱᚢꝫᧉ knokled knarrez with knorned stonez' (2166), an unexpected landmark which provides not only a memorable line of alliterative sonority but a topographical detail which does indeed look very much like something the poet was not making up out of his head.

What Gawain eventually discovers is no Chapel Perilous of romance but an uncanny natural phenomenon carved into the hillside on his left, half cave, half crevice, hollow inside with tufts of grass (*glodes*) clinging precariously to its steep rocky sides. This has frequently been taken to be a barrow, an ancient burial mound, not inappropriately called a 'chapel', although it is not easy to visualize a barrow with 'a hole on þe ende and on ayþer syde' (2180). Admittedly, the Green Chapel, whatever it is, is amply endowed by the poet with supernatural, if not funerary, associations as a desolate and baneful oratory, a cursed, disastrous church, a place fit for a 'borelych burne' like the Green Knight or indeed the devil himself. But it is important to remember that both the word *berꝫ* (2172) and the word *lawe* (2175) are normally used in Middle English toponymy to denote simply a hill. The poet's 'balꝫe berꝫ' is a

rounded hill (Smith 1956, I 18), while he had previously used *lawe* to describe the elevated position of Bertilak's castle. While *lawe* figures in Middle English, not least in alliterative poetry, with the general meaning of 'hill', *ber3* is quite rare except in place-names. Both words, however, must be regarded as largely bereft of whatever funerary associations they may have carried in Old English.

It is not inappropriate to call *Gawain* 'in many ways a fourteenth-century detective fiction' (Stanbury 1991b, 109), and not the least of Gawain's problems was finding his way to the Green Chapel and then recognizing it in the 'olde caue, or a creuisse of an olde cragge' (218283) confronting him. The poet, as Brewer surmised, clearly knew such a place and how to find it, and such a place does actually exist.

Like any good writer of detective fiction the *Gawain*-poet is careful to drop a clue now and then to help the reader or listener towards solving whatever mystery is enshrined in his narrative.

It is not unusual for medieval poets to mention actual place-names, but it is unusual to trace an Arthurian knight's journey along a well-defined route through North Wales, across the estuary of the Dee into Wirral, and then

Inside Ludchurch

follow him into hilly country until he eventually reaches a remote castle appropriately called 'High Wilderness', with a very peculiar 'chapel' nearby, which is described in such circumstantial detail that it is almost as good as a photograph.

The inclusion of real place-names was clearly important to the poet, as was his mentioning personal names. It is worthy of note that the only major character in *Gawain* who remains unnamed is Bertilak's wife. Hers is primarily a symbolic role as the beautiful temptress of Hautdesert. To resist her advances is as much a challenge for Gawain as finding his way from Camelot to the Green Chapel.

The 'realistic' geography of *Gawain* may well have been intended by the poet to direct his audience's attention towards the locale of that mysterious half cave, half crevice where the final encounter takes place. This is even more probable if this weird chapel happens to have close links with other places in the vicinity with which the poet and his audience may have been associated. Several times the use of the definite article suggests familiarity with the 'real' places mentioned *en route*. The Knight reaches 'þe Norþe Walez' (697), leaves 'þe iles of Anglesay' (698) on his left, fares across 'þe fordez by þe forlondez' (699) at 'þe Holy Hede' (700), until he enters 'þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale' (701). Thereafter, as we noted earlier, the geography again assumes a 'romantic' colouring, but the route leads unmistakably into hilly country, the landscape of Hautdesert and its surrounding hunting terrain of forest, marshland, and mysterious Green Chapel.

Where exactly Gawain crossed the Dee into Wirral the poet does not say, but two places merit special attention. One is Aldford, the

'old ford' where Watling Street crossed the river south of Chester, whose significance is mentioned below; the other is close to Holywell, which is about a mile inland on the Welsh side of the estuary. The latter may well be the poet's 'Holy Hede', for it was here, according to tradition, that Prince Caradoc, failing to seduce St Winefride, struck off the saint's head. The spot became the most famous healing well in the British Isles and a popular place of pilgrimage. To make Gawain pass this very place on the way to his own expected decapitation adds a touch of irony to the poem not uncharacteristic of the *Gawain*-poet.

The poet's word *forlondez*, best explained as deriving from Old Norse *forlendi* 'land between sea and hills', aptly describes the low-lying coastal strip between the Clwdian Range and the tidal estuary of the Dee where Holywell is situated. Three hundred years after Gawain another intrepid traveller, Celia Fiennes, crossed the Dee after leaving Holywell, describing in her diary the shifting fords (*fordez*) created by tide and quicksand.

That Wirral was indeed a *wyldrenesse* in the late fourteenth century is amply attested by contemporary records of lawlessness and local rebellions (Bennett 1983, 935, 2089). The poet was clearly as familiar with local Cheshire conditions, where

> wonde þer bot lyte
> þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied, (7012)

as with its geography.

After crossing the Dee, Gawain probably followed the Earl's Way, or Earlsway, a well-established medieval route whose name was first recorded about the year 1200 (Palliser 1976, 80). This led from Chester in an easterly direction straight towards the nearest hill country, the moorlands beyond Leek, where north Staffordshire borders on Cheshire and Derbyshire, where the poet's dialect has been authoritatively located (McIntosh 1963, 5; McLaughlin 1963, 14), where the poet's unusual topographical terms appear in local place-names like Knar, Knotbury, Flash, and where several caves vie for the distinction of having inspired the Green Chapel. The poet probably knew these.

One of these is Thor's Cave, some six miles west of Leek, the 'Capital of the Moorlands', above the river Manifold. Less than a mile to the north is another cave, at Wetton Mill in the same valley, which boasts several holes and resembles the Green Chapel in some respects, as has been well argued (Kaske 1970, 11121). Neither of these caves is a barrow, although some prehistoric artifacts have been found in Thor's Cave, whose earlier name appears to have been Thurse Cave, the giant's cave. It is probable that the poet was familiar with the Manifold valley including the underground passage of the river in this region of the Pennine limestone country for several miles, only to reappear further down with rushing water. The phenomenon is the likely model for the phrases ' goteȝ of golf' in *Pearl* 608 and ' goteȝ of þy guferes' in *Patience* 310, both vividly describing currents of water gushing

forth from deep cavities.

However, there is another spot which bears an even stronger resemblance to the Green Chapel, I believe, than either of the two caves in the Manifold valley. Although it is of course conceivable that the poet drew on more than one real locale in the creation of his Green Chapel, several of the features of this third site are sufficiently arresting to think that he was primarily thinking of one specific place. This is Ludchurch or Lud's Church, a natural cleft in the side of a rounded hill above the river Dane on the Staffordshire-Cheshire border, truly half cave, half crevice, as the poet says, overlooked by a group of oddly twisted *knarrez* whose appearance earned them the name Castle Cliff Rocks, and rich in local legends and traditions involving Lollardry (cf. Davies 1961, 19), truly 'a chapel of meschaunce' (2195).

Ludchurch is a stupendous cleft of some 100 yards in length, from 30 to 40 feet in depth, and with a breadth ranging from six to ten feet. Its walls are vertical and overhanging, with tufts of grass clinging to them. Entrance is through a cavelike opening in the hillside, and at either end there are holes leading into the earth, partly explored by adventurous potholers. It is indeed a very odd 'church'. The name Lud's Church was known to the seventeenth-

century Staffordshire historian Robert Plot; perhaps it was originally the 'Lollards' Church'. Of particular interest is that in the time of the *Gawain*-poet it formed part of the possessions of the Cistercian abbey ofDieulacres, which was originally founded at Poulton (its 'holy head'), near Aldford, the previously mentioned ancient fording place on the Dee a few miles upstream from Chester, before being moved into the Staffordshire moorlands near Leek to escape the depredations of the neighbouring Welshmen.

When *Gawain* was composed the monks of Dieulacres, who were incidentally keen hunters and indeed poachers in neighbouring royal forests, were maintaining regular contact with their possessions in Chester and across the Dee, presumably following much the same route as Gawain's likely course.

One of their possessions was a grange in the forest about five miles north of the abbey, at a place called Swythamley Park, overlooked by a lengthy escarpment called The Roaches (recalling the poet's *rocherez*), where the earls of Chester once owned a hunting lodge on an eminence recorded as Knight's Low ('on a lawe'). This was never a castle like Hautdesert, but its location *just two miles from Ludchurch* suggests yet again that the *Gawain*-poet's realistic geography was firmly rooted in the familiar landscapes of this corner of the north-west Midlands of England.

Even an analysis as brief and incomplete as this makes it clear how each of the characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is given an individual voice and how the chief means of differentiating these voices is variation in syntax. This is particularly effective as a means of characterisation, since of all the elements of language syntax is the one which most readily creates the illusion of reflecting the inner workings of the mind. Not, of course, that the poet himself would have formulated his method in any such terms: he no doubt worked by intuition based on observation of how differences in linguistic habit often reflect differences in personality (do we not all know living speakers who combine the Green Knight's fondness for unqualified imperatives with his domineering attitude to his fellow-men?). In any event, for a poet working within the conventions of alliterative verse it was a brilliant stroke to choose syntax as the instrument of characterisation, for in this medium syntax is the linguistic feature most readily varied, vocabulary and phraseology being necessarily so much subject to the exigencies of the meter. And this is not all; for, not content with inventing distinctive voices for each main character, the poet has so tuned and modulated those voices as to make them echo, contrast and counterpoint one another in as it were an orchestration of character.

Ralph W. V. Elliott

One day in May, 1135, some white monks from Combermere Abbey founded a new Cistercian monastery near a ford of the Dee at Poulton a few miles upstream from Chester. In itself this was no very epoch-making event, but evidence is accumulating to strengthen the view that in due course the founding of Poulton Abbey led to the writing of the greatest medieval English poem outside the work of Chaucer: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The poet has left us no clue to his identity or habitat except the sensuous vividness of his landscape painting, which suggests both a remarkable eye for detail and a close familiarity with the scenes depicted, and at one place in the poem, while Sir Gawain searches

for the Green Chapel, we are actually given a piece of genuine itinerary. Sir Gawain is journeying through North Wales, leaving Anglesey on his left hand, and then crosses the Dee by some ford into the "wilderness of Wirral."

The remaining action of the poem takes place in or near the castle of Bercilak de Hautdesert (who later turns out to be the Green Knight) and, although no more place-names are mentioned, the poet was obviously at home in the wild, hilly countryside he describes. The nearest scenery fitting these descriptions within the area covered by the poet's dialect is the Staffordshire Peak country, and here is our first important link with Poulton, for as the Welsh proved unruly neighbors, the whole abbey, while retaining its Cheshire possessions, was transplanted, in May, 1214, to a wild corner of North Staffordshire moorland, by the river Churnet near Leek, to become the abbey of St. Mary and St. Benedict of Dieulacres.

The organizer of this move was Ranulph, Earl of Chester, whose father according to tradition had died near the same spot, at his favorite hunting lodge of Swythamley, which formed part of the new abbey's endowment. Here the monks established one of their granges, half farm, half miniature monastery, cultivating forest and marsh until the grange became the "Parke-laund" of the sixteenth century, and it is still a private seat.

There was never a castle at Swythamley such as Sir Gawain so opportunely discovered, but not only is Gawain's approach to the castle very like the journey from the present Abbey Farm (with its few pathetic remains of the monastic buildings) to Swythamley Park, but there is also a distinct likeness between the terrain at Swythamley with its central eminence, once called Knight's Low, and the situation of the poetic castle, enthroned *on a lawe*. That such a castle never actually existed need not surprise us, for the several up-to-date features so expertly enumerated by the poet were only just beginning to make their separate appearance in English domestic and ecclesiastical architecture. It was a brilliant vision superimposed upon a genuine English hill.

It is here that Sir Gawain relaxes and is subjected to the temptation of his alluring hostess while her husband is away hunting, for three successive days, deer, boar, and fox. Here again the terrain is at times so vividly described that identification becomes possible, particularly on the second day, that of the boar hunt.

Starting from Swythamley, within echoing distance of the Roaches

(the poet's *rocheres*), the hunters crossed the latter then headed northwards past Flash (the poet's *flosche*) towards the steep banks and narrow valleys of the Wildboarclough country beyond the river Dane. Many of the features the poet mentions in unusual topographical words still bear the same or closely similar names to-day.

Sir Gawain was able to relax at Bercilak's castle because upon arrival he had been assured that the Green Chapel which he sought was "not two miles hence." Again the poet was speaking from personal knowledge, and it is almost uncanny to read his description and the directions given to Gawain by his guide and then to walk the two miles that separate Swythamley Park from what is surely one of the most fantastic natural chapels in existence. From the top of a "high hill" Gawain's guide points to a steep valley:—

> Ride down this path along that rocky bank
> Till you reach the bottom of this forbidding valley,
> Then look up a little among the trees on your left hand,
> And there, along the valley, you will see the Green Chapel.

Anyone can make the same journey to-day, first climbing up towards Roach End from Swythamley, then turning sharply northwards and down again, steeply, some 500 feet in under a mile, into the valley of the Black Brook and thus to its junction with the Dane at the Forest Bottom. Sir Gawain saw no building there, only rocky crags and strange piles of stones all *knokled* and *knorned;* and indeed all you can see to-day, up on the left bank, are the twisted shapes of the Castle Cliff Rocks.

But the poet knew that there was something else there, "either an old cave or a crevice of an old crag—he could not say for certain," a tremendous rock fissure entered through a cave-like hole in the hillside. Already in the seventeenth century Dr. Plot, historian of Staffordshire, knew it as Lud's Church or Ludchurch, truly a weird church, about 100 ft. long, with vertical walls up to over 50 ft. high, nowhere above 10 ft. wide, and with a hole at each end leading downwards into the earth and hitherto only partly explored. Tradition records it as the hiding place of Lollards and the surrounding region is rich with legends of headless riders and a tall man in Lincoln green.

One other detail the poet adds, and again its source is at the same spot: after Sir Gawain has climbed to the top of the Green Chapel he hears from "that high hill" a strange tumult emanating from the

other side of the brook, a fierce grinding noise "grievous to hear." There is no forge now at the Forest Bottom, but on old maps it is still marked, and the little wooden bridge over the Black Brook still bears the revealing name of the original stone arch, Castor's Bridge, and traces of iron slag lie not far below the soil. That the Cistercians of Dieulacres and Swythamley grange worked this forge has yet to be proved, but it is highly probable.

Other interesting links remain to strengthen the chain of evidence that connects Poulton and Dieulacres with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; it is hoped to publish them before long. Not the least remarkable of them is the fact that just when the poet was combining, for the first time, it is believed, in English his two themes of the temptation of Gawain and the beheading challenge, the abbot of Dieulacres was involved in 1379 in a very shady incident in which a local man of some substance was beheaded on the moors just outside Leek.

By themselves these parallels and identifications may not amount to much, but added up they present a body of evidence which may bring us closer than ever before to this unknown artist of the fourteenth century. It is no wasted labor, for he was a great English poet.